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Title

Travel Documents

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Journal

Places, 3(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1986-10-01

Peer reviewed

Travel Documents

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One summer, on a street in Paris, not far from the cathedral of Notre Dame, I saw a facade entitled *La Chambre Claire*. These words are the French title of Roland Barthes's book on photography. (In English, the title went Latin as *Camera Lucida*). I was excited. Was I to enter a book that I had admired, to partake in a discussion of photography? It was, of course, not a book but a retail store of photographic books, including images of buildings in Paris. I laughed to think that my own arduous photographic trip had virtually ended in a photographic bookstore. At least one-quarter of the books contained images of travel, that is, images of distant places. These photographs were now edited and held between covers. The juxtaposition of the booked images with the actual monuments so near at hand reminded me of a paradox of photography, especially photographs of monuments. The images appear to be statements of fact, yet they necessarily distort.

I have a very strong memory of a photograph of a monument that appeared in art history books. This photograph, of the Arch of Trajan at Ancona, Italy, seized my imagination powerfully. Such photographs usually cut in close to the sides of the monument so that one might study the details of its surface reliefs; the photographs did not include the site of the arch.

Imagine my amazement when I visited this arch and found it to be the gateway to a busy seaport, as it has been for much of its existence.

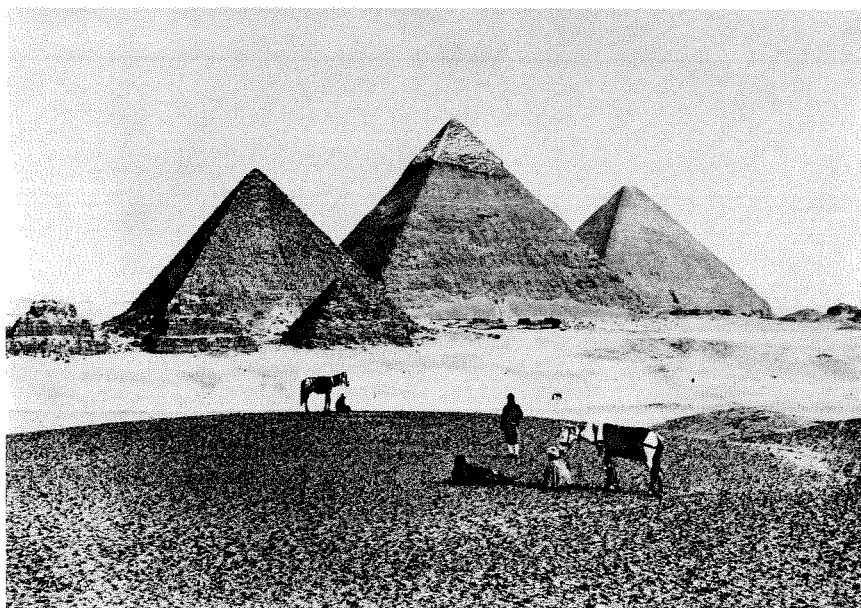


1 Arch of Trajan, Ancona, Italy.

Photograph courtesy Fototeca Unione, Rome, Italy.



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2 **Alice Wingwall**, *Diachronic Architectural Dreams*.
Temple of Vesta, Roman Forum, Rome 1977.

3 **Francis Frith**. *The pyramids at Giza, Egypt, 1857*. The New York Public Library, Research Division, the Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

In the photographs it had been abstracted from its port and shipyard location for art's sake. Its site on the Adriatic, its framing of arrival and departure, imbued it with the essence of travel, so to speak, yet they were missing from the image. I felt deceived by photographer, photograph, and art. Most deplorably, the arch's photographic removal from its site had made it impossible for me to appraise its travel connections.

A few days later, as I mused on temple fragments at the Forum in Rome, it became clear that the "deception" I experienced at Ancona was a necessary part of making photographs. For my photograph of a little temple of Vesta, I wanted an abstraction in photographic space that would emphasize the temple's ambivalence in time, in my time, and in at least two versions of Roman time. It was critical that the image be removed from its surroundings.

I could say that photographs always lie, that they abstract, distort, or dislocate as a part of their design process. The photograph, as one form of recording must exclude as well as include. The photograph selects and relocates information. Photographs are fragments of a place transported from their sites, much as the Egyptian temple of Dendur was extracted and transplanted in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

The installation of this temple is similar to postcard and book images. It is very clean. Its beige

planes float serenely. No water of the Nile eddies here, no sand blows around the spot, no sun blazes from the sky parching everything. The temple's shadowy openings and sculptural spaces and platforms are surrounded by a ledge from which viewers can observe the complex. This ledge reminds me of the frame of photographs. The composition is defined, the boundaries direct our view. The "abstraction" of the temple of Dendur is a three-dimensional version of the abstraction, of the taking from context, we experience in photographs. Without the annoyance of a passage through the Egyptian heat we can choose the time, place, and pace of an artful contemplation.

Remote and isolated sites with extensive ruins to decipher were early both tourist attractions and subjects of books. Photographic books began to appear almost as soon as photography itself. In a foreword to the book *Up the Nile*, Anne Horton noted that "daguerreotypists rushed there in 1839 just after the announcement in Paris of Daguerre's process."¹ Egyptian views by French photographers were published as early as 1840.² Francis Frith, an English photographer, described the agony of working with collodion plates in the 130-degree heat.³ Frith saw and composed, photographically, the Egyptian sites in 1857. Those who wished to see Egypt in a less demanding way could view the books of his photographs published in London after 1859.⁴ Photographs such as



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4 Rome, San Biagio. Christian Elling, *Rome: The Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen*, pl. 24 (Boulder, CO: The Westview Press, 1975).

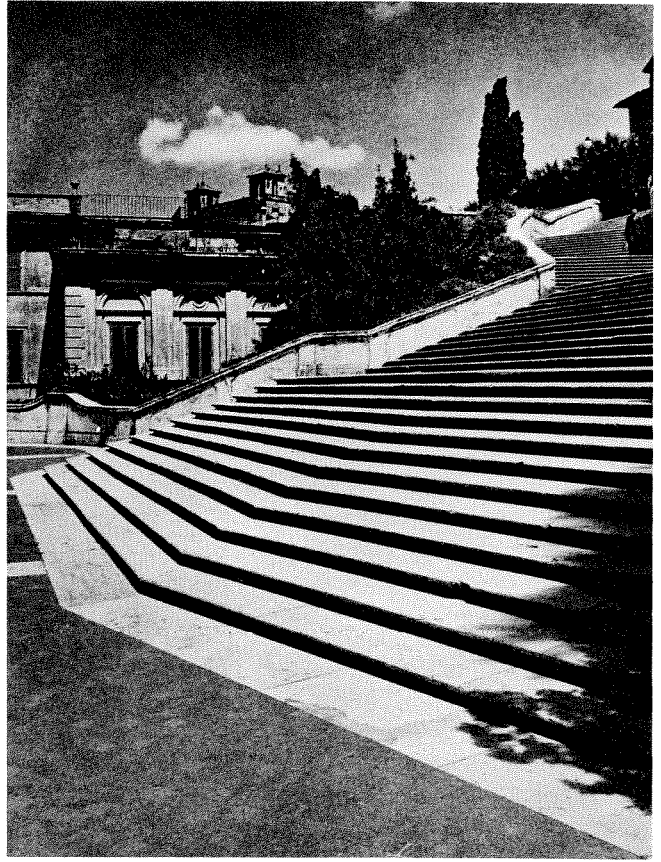


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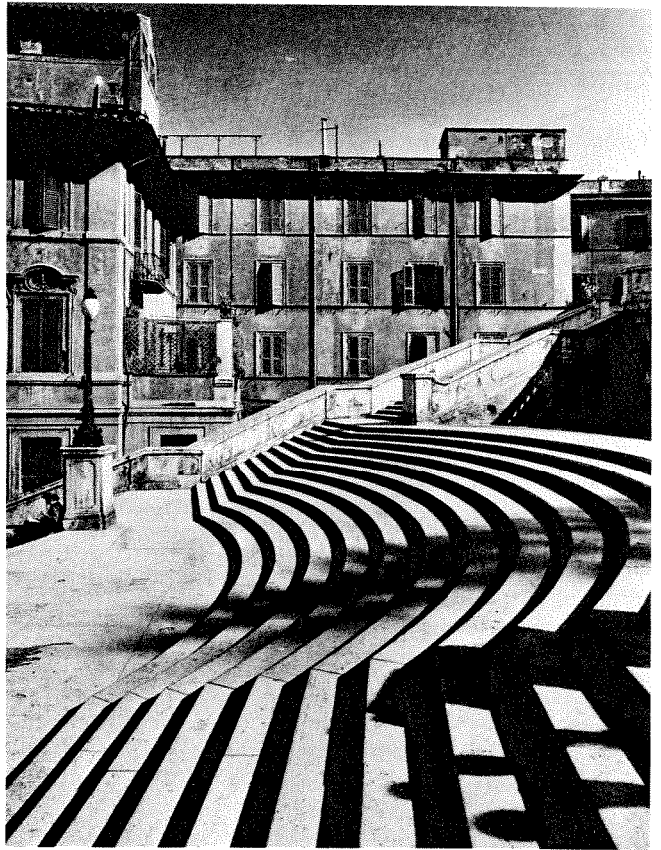
5 Rome, Palazzo Grimaldi. Christian Elling, *Rome: A Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen*, pl. 103 (Boulder, CO: The Westview Press, 1975).

6 Rome, The Spanish Steps. Christian Elling, *Rome: A Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen*, pl. 129 (Boulder, CO: The Westview Press, 1975).

7 Rome, The Spanish Steps. Christian Elling, *Rome: A Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen*, pl. 132 (Boulder, CO: The Westview Press, 1975).



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those taken by Frith in Egypt became prototypes for photographs of tourist sites.

Photographs assembled in books allow a controlled experience of displacement. The viewer can linger or not, can lengthen or shorten perusal, much as the photographer did originally. Books allow us to take time, to stop and place the moment of viewing. This contemplative looking can emulate the original contemplative taking. With what monument will we linger today?

Rome: The Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen, by Christian Elling, is a collection of single photographs that presents a picture of the city. A little over one hundred years after the daguerreotypists left for Egypt, Elling, a Danish architectural historian, went to Rome. His work on Roman eighteenth-century architecture was awarded the Amalienborg Prize in 1972 as a distinguished work in the humanities in the Danish language. It was published in Danish, then in English in 1975, with beautifully printed photographs. I think it is little known among photographic books. Christian Elling intended to take a fresh look at Rome's eighteenth-century buildings. At Elling's direction, Lennart of Petersens took 119 of the 185 new photographs; Elling took the rest himself.⁵ There are no photographic credits in the book.

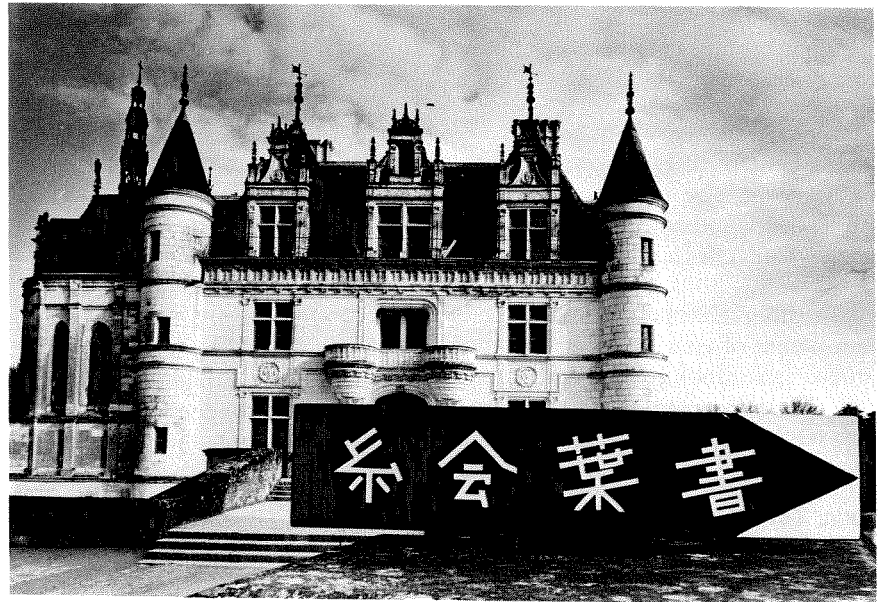
The majority of photographs are in what I call a "broad" style; that is, the full face of one or more

buildings is seen from across a street or a piazza. The second group is in an "intimate" style: close-in photographs of corners and angles of buildings, for example, the bays at the San Gallicoe Hospital and the corner of the Palazzo Grimaldi. Since all the photographs were taken under Christian Elling's instruction, seeming differences of style are only differences caused by lens length or street width at the buildings. Whatever the broadness or intimacy of the photographs, they have a common feature. Each has a passage or street along the front or side or angled out of a piazza around another edge of a second building. Many buildings are isolated as monuments, but the sense of city is always present because of the inclusion of streets and squares and the implications of their connections to other buildings and sites. The arresting apertures of windows, doors, arcades, and balconies are always balanced by streets directing us somewhere else. This double sense of corner and connection is maintained in two unusual photographs of the Spanish Steps, taken from across the steps at about midlevel instead of from the ordinary bottom location. We see facades of the buildings along the sides, and the wonderful rhythm of the angles of the steps becomes a current held in place along a Roman wall. These views of the steps' containment and eddying against its walls are much more exciting than the view of its vertical design that we are generally served. Both photographs convey the actual feeling of being on the steps. These

photographs enhance the beauty of their eighteenth-century subjects and underscore their artful presence alongside the undulating facades of Baroque neighbors.

If we look at photographs of a city that we have already visited, we may remember many buildings that we did not record photographically. Experience and memory work together to supply missing details of place; the referent buildings and the photographic ones compete for our attention. When we photograph monuments, we might also be influenced by photographs we have seen previously. If the compositions are coincidentally alike, we might feel that the book justified our visit to the city or, inversely, that the city justified a visit to the book. Our compositional choices also might be original. In all three cases, the photographs as locations and fragments will be as real to us as, say, the fragments we find around us in Rome.

Whatever the motives or the previous experience of the viewer, the photographs as facts or confirmations may be perceptually equal. For example, I have visited and know fairly well the areas around San Biagio in Rome. There are many buildings, two large and important public piazze, and several juxtapositions of corners. When I see the photograph from Elling's book, I can review these connections, but the photographic fact is one of an isolated structure. Similarly, size differences in the buildings are no longer critical; the framed openings of the Palazzo



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Grimaldi corner may be perceived to be the same size as those of San Biagio.

Such photographic equivalencies are based on dislocation. I use dislocation in a positive, not a pejorative, way. Photographs lined up, placed, or charted in a particular way in a book will invite new comparisons and forge new relationships. The sequencing will become a direction to new photographic terrain.

A series of individual photographic essays, each titled *Journal d'un Voyage* (Travel Diary) were published in France in 1978. The publisher, Filipacchi-Denoël, and the director, Jeanloup Sieff, chose four famous photographers to participate. Each photographer

went to a place where he might not have been able to work because of professional demands or lack of money. The journeys were not limited to France; they could go far afield or to the interior of the mind.⁶

Robert Doisneau chose the Loire Valley. Doisneau does not confront the chateaux as isolated monuments but shows their existence in the daily life of the Loire Valley, including events that occur each day: Chinese signs at Chenonceaux, horseback jumping practice, fishing, complaints of the elderly, and, most strikingly, tourists who speed through the area. Perhaps the most arresting photograph in the group is that of three helmeted motorcyclists. Their visored faces burst upon us near the lens and

partially hide the extensive mass of Chambord. Indeed the castle seems to emerge from their helmets instead of the land. Ideas are carried by those who pass through, and we might only notice this place because of the giddy intrusive presence of these travelers, nearly falling out of the front of the frame. Nothing is isolated or symmetrical, and connections are suggested that are not obvious.

In another of these travel diaries, Duane Michals photographs himself against the wonders of Egypt (*Merveilles d'Egypte*) he chose to visit. In front of three pyramids he shows us and tells us that he "built a pyramid: The most difficult thing, when one builds his own personal pyramid, is to get up very early in the morning and go by



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8 Robert Doisneau. Chenonceaux. *Journal d'un Voyage: La Loire*, p. 42. (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978). Photograph copyright 1978, Robert Doisneau.

9 Robert Doisneau. Chambord and motorcyclists. *Journal d'un Voyage: La Loire*, pp. 56–57 (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978). Photograph copyright 1978, Robert Doisneau.



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10 Duane Michals. Building a pyramid at Giza. *Journal d'un Voyage: Merveilles d'Egypte*, p. 44 (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoél, 1978). Photograph copyright 1978, Duane Michals.

11 Duane Michals. Ritual Fire at Luxor. *Journal d'un Voyage: Merveilles d'Egypte*, p. 93 (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoél, 1978). Photograph copyright 1978, Duane Michals.

foot to the appropriate spot. The second hardest thing is the selection of good stones. I left my pyramid so that the Japanese could discover it. I wonder if it is still there.”⁷ In a second set of photographs at Luxor, the artist burns paper and photographs the act. For this he says, “I was raised in the Catholic religion and afterwards I always hated the idea of ritual; but here, it seemed in some way appropriate.”⁸ Michals speaks of photographing the pyramids by moonlight and what a memorable experience it was.⁹ He photographs the light entering the monuments.

Now we have an entirely different experience of action in front of the Egyptian monuments, far from the vast quietness of the photographs of Francis Frith. In his we saw the fullness, silence, and emptiness. Now, because of Duane Michals’s intervention and the intrusion of his camera, we can begin to see these Egyptian monuments in a different way. We too, as viewers, can enter the spaces, both exterior and interior, and the photographs are filled with the imagined sound of our presence in the monuments. Now, more than being struck by shifting sand and immutable monuments, we are perhaps filled with the terror of the dark interior spaces, bemused with the luminous quality of the little air that enters, awestruck with the scale of differences of giant stone heads against the frail human ones. We can fall on the ground speculating on the presence of the god or the goat in front of the pyramid. The monumentality remains, but we are struck with the possibility of a

thousand fragmented actions we might take, with bits of insights about what it is like to be there. These photographs, as fragments of experience, will be as demanding as we review them as the actual presence of current urban intrusions that we experience in Rome, the photographs of which may delude us about the monumental relationships that we might encounter there. Photographically, there has been a switch. Now the photographer makes more demands on the viewer, and buildings cease to live in our minds in isolation.

In a very graphic way, the composition that Doisneau framed for us of the helmeted heads intruding upon and initiating the mass of Chambord suggests that tourist images develop from our own minds. The photographers in this series seek active and intrusive juxtapositions rather than artful repose.

Here we come to a paradox. The photographer invites intrusion. In Michal's photographs he insists on intrusion by placing himself in the scene in an active way. The photographs encourage agitation. Activity quivers near the surface. In his three photographs of the granite chapel of Nektanebos at Edfu, the light shimmers and pulsates from the doorway. Michals describes it as lightning.¹⁰ The luminosity is like the reflection in the visors of the bikers in the Doisneau photograph, and these devices lure us to the action, to enter the photograph. But we are dealing with still photography, which stops the action, and the series of images are



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12 Duane Michals. Edfu, Temple of Horus, chapel of Nektanebos. *Journal d'un Voyage: Merveilles d'Egypte*, p. 87 (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978). Photographs copyright 1978, Duane Michals.



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13 Duane Michals. Ritual Fire at Luxor.
Journal d'un Voyage: Merveilles d'Égypte, p. 91
 (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978). Photograph
 copyright 1978, Duane Michals.

lined up in a book. Michals insists that we move from one image to the next, but we must still stop at each edge of white. The photographs are pulsings, held within the frame of the page, double boundaries that heighten the tension between one stilled action and the next, which cause us to imagine other maneuvers between the frames, “in the white,” so to speak. Duane Michals photographing himself at the Egyptian monuments is enacting rituals similar to those of thousands of other tourists who are not ordinarily photographers, but rather than placing himself solidly and statically in front of the buildings, Michals, with his sequenced frames, lets us see his activity. Instead of striking an attitude of dumb amazement or being solid as a sculpture, he runs around to start another pyramid.

Because of the angle of camera for the self-portraits, Michals also becomes very large in relation to the pyramids and temples. In photographic fact, his proportions loom far larger than those of the figures that appear in the space Frith allowed in front of the pyramids at Giza. In Michals’s photographs, the inversion of scale brought about by the photographic equivalencies of figure and monument makes the monuments, even the pyramids, seem curiously intimate.

Arrangements of photographs in books have very much to do with these juxtapositions of scale. In a book, the photographs generally are fit into a set format, and the need for book pages to fold to the

same size mean that photographs generally will not be either gigantic or tiny. In their side by side boxes, photographic facts will even out. We may think that if the “boxes” are the same size, so may be the contents. It is then the viewer who must sort out the large and small of it all, who must “nibble or drink” something to change his/her size or to change the size of what he/she sees in this Alice-in-Photo-Wonderland approach to photographic space.

Photographs of tourist sites, even of the great classic ones, and books containing numbers of them have essentially invited us to go somewhere. We could modify one of Roland Barthes’s comments about a Charles Camball photograph, “Alhambra,” “it is *there* that I should want to live,”¹¹ to “it is *there* that I should want to go.” Barthes proposed the notion of the *punctum*, that thing in a photograph (different for each viewer) that punctures, seizes, or wounds us.¹² We may all see the same information but will be wounded by very different things, and, of course, that kind of participation in the photographic elements may have nothing to do with the activity or stillness of the parts of the composition. Therefore the viewer might be stimulated by the activity of a photograph to emulate the scene or may be entirely calmed by the locked parts of another composition. But a second kind of activity is proposed by Barthes’s analysis: there might be a *punctum* in the calmest of compositions that would cause a flurry on the part of the viewer.

Barthes says the *punctum* has the “power of expansion,” a latency (of action in space) that the other information in the photograph will not have.¹³

Barthes calls the photograph “the advent.”¹⁴ The photograph comes toward us (*advenire*) from the original subject. Barthes also thinks the photograph is not distinguishable from its referent.¹⁵ I agree that in perception this distinction probably does not occur; that is, images become the monument or the activity they depict.

Photographers will have their own myths that inspire the content of their work. The spectator/viewer cannot hope to know them all, but the photograph can stimulate more imaginative wanderings. Juxtapositions in the viewer’s mind will be provoked by the content and its potential development. Both Doisneau and Michals show us subjects or monuments “in use.” Both photographers imply entry into the image. Even I might be surprised next to Chambord, or I too might dream of appearing and disappearing from the mysterious gateways of temples or arriving on a beam of light unexpectedly borne forth. Indeed, the Michals images go far toward convincing us that we may come and go as we desire among these monuments, that we are not contained by the frame of any photograph or any book. Michals, as an “Artful Dodger,” changes our perception of scale between ourselves and these gigantic monuments.

Whatever their compositional or mythic intent and content, these photographs, these books of collected photographs, have the same consequence. They stimulate us to enter the image, to imagine beyond the act of the photographer. By looking at the subjects brought to us by their photographic excursions, we will have found, if not the itinerary for an actual voyage, the starting point for another journey of the imagination. There may be several motivations for studying such travel documents. One might choose a book of photographs because one was certain that one would never go there and want information about the site. Or one might definitely plan to go and need information and access to the monuments. Finally, one might have already been there and want confirmation of decisions and choices previously made, simply to relive the experience. Almost all of the photographs in the books I chose to introduce here have one thing in common: there is an “entry space,” a stretch of land, a square, street, stair, or other flat space back of the front frame that is a place for the viewer to “go,” to enter and stand in front of the building or thing photographed. Thus it is “easy” to take up Barthes’s notion of living or going there. These spaces function as a transition between the viewer and the subject of the photograph.

My reconstruction of Roland Barthes’s argument is that we are displaced because we are grasped by some elements of the photograph and therefore must act upon the terms of the photograph.

I call this displacement an entry into the terrain of the photograph. The moment of displacement, or entry, will be different for each viewer. It is perhaps a conceit to think that Barthes's ideas may have concerned photographers themselves or the actions they might take while actually photographing. The photographers are surely moved by quite other *idées fixes*. Barthes's "this is where I want to live" is an action of viewing and decision taken by the viewers of such photographs. Viewers may choose books rather than individual random images because there will seem to be an order or progression to these "displacements." The movements and entries can be charted, and clear relationships can be seen. The books of photographs that I looked at were clear about directing the viewer's path through their territory.

In a directional sense, all photographic books intend to manipulate our response to their content much as visits to the classic sites were intended to inform us about artful composition. In Elling's book, compositional modes followed this formal intent. Barthes has now introduced the *punctum* as an active way of viewing photographs, and Michals and Doisneau compose active photographic responses that mentally break the stasis of book formats.

The one photograph that is radically active is that of the helmeted bikers of Robert Doisneau. The three heads are virtually extruded right at the front

edge. The photographic fact is that if we try to get in, we would kick these three in the teeth. The only entry possibilities are a quick leap-frog over the top or a long run around the outside of the line. The sculptural heads seem to mock attempts to enter this space. Chambord is in their heads; they are its initiators and its guardians. For me, the *punctum* of this photograph is this very relationship of tourists to the monument in question. How do I get there after all?

NOTES

- 1 Deborah Bull and Donald Lorimar, *Up the Nile, A Photographic Excursion: 1839–1898* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1979), foreword, by Anne Horton.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- 4 Francis Frith, *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*, 2 vols. (London: James S. Virtue, n.d.).
- 5 Christian Elling, *Rome: The Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1975), foreword.
- 6 Robert Doisneau, *Journal d'un Voyage: La Loire* (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978), editor's preface.
- 7 Duane Michals, *Journal d'un Voyage: Merveilles d'Egypte* (Paris: Filipacchi-Denoël, 1978), caption for plates 42–47.
- 8 *Ibid.*, caption for plates 90–95.
- 9 *Ibid.*, caption for plates 34–37.
- 10 *Ibid.*, caption for plate 87.
- 11 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 38.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 19.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 5.