

Peter Hanley

Dr. Miles Orvell

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Photography as Literature:

The Sequences of Duane Michals

Although Duane Michals produced photographic work in several genres during his career, his best-known work involved narrative photographic sequences that focused on mostly spiritual or existential motifs. Many of these sequences incorporated hand written captions or stories, changing the images from photographs into the illustrations of a short story or vignette.

This paper is an attempt to identify a genre that can be used to discuss Michals' sequences, and discuss the idiosyncratic vocabulary of photographic devices that he uses in order to represent the un-photographable elements that he is well known for exploring.

Identification of Genre in Michals' Work

Given that most critical writing devoted to Michals is concerned primarily with his philosophy and favorite themes, there is little discussion of into what genre his work fits. Michals' sequences feel structurally familiar to us, but at the same time don't seem to be similar in structure to works by other artists—or at least they are different enough that it seems reasonable to assume that

Michals is working in a genre of his own making. Other photographers (A.D. Coleman suggests Eiko Hosoe, Ralph Gibson, Eugene Meatyard, and others (Coleman, 193)) work with narrative structures in their own works, but while these works bear some similarity to Michals (surreal or fantastic imagery, for example) they do not use the photographic sequence as a primary vehicle. Michals seems to be relatively alone in the photographic world, at least as far as his sequential work is concerned.

In her introduction to the book "The Journey of the Spirit After Death," Riccarda Höft describes Michals' sequences as "reminiscent of tableaux vivants and comic strips" (Höft, 83). While one can see the superficial similarities of spiritual subject matter between some tableaux vivants and a Michals sequence, this comparison misses the mark as he is neither attempting to recreate "representations of statuary groups" (Brewer, "tableaux vivant") nor other famous works of art through photography. Höft suggests prior categorizations of "surrealist or fantastic photography," (Höft, 83) but these words only allude to qualities of the work and fail to address his form and narrative (although "fantastic" can certainly be applied to the texts that accompany his images).

Although it may approach unorthodoxy to discuss the formal intersection of fine art photographic work with the comic strip, perhaps this idea should be given stronger consideration, as no other genre fits Michals well.

The formal aspects of comics are given much less critical attention than the content of comics. However, Scott McCloud's excellent *Understanding Comics* is an excellent overview of the medium from an analytical vantage point. Rather than study the content of individual comics, he instead seeks to define the genre formally as a genre of art that is relatively unexplored in opposition to the more common view of comics as pap for the masses.

McCloud begins with a definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" with the stipulation that words are not necessarily incorporated--although they often are (McCloud, 9) (Note: McCloud's definition of the noun *comics* specifies that the singular is identical to the plural when discussing the genre, i.e. *Superman* is a *comic*, but its genre is *comics*. This convention is used throughout this paper). This definition describes the underlying (and obvious) form of Michals' sequences quite aptly: this is the method by which he communicates. As Max Kozloff points out, describing what sets Michals apart from others: "it's important to separate the idea of the sequential, in which picture units are arranged in a fixed order for story purpose, from the concept of the serial, in which pictures are clustered so that they display a pattern or simple variations on a theme." Many photographers work with series or collections of type, but what makes Michals work stand

out is the use of photographs in a deliberate sequence to describe a specific event or discrete story of which he can be said to be the author.

Michals distinguished what he was doing from film by viewing the photographic sequence "in analogy to haiku—as one moment" (Höft, 91). Of course by moment Michals means a short time (given that a single photograph can mean a moment), or more abstractly a single time. Although it is tempting to look at his work with a cinematic eye, his work is not cinema—as Barthes put it "In the photograph, something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever...but in cinema something *has passed* in front of the same tiny hole; the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images..." (Barthes, 78). What defines many of his sequences is the frozen quality of the figures, which are left to the viewer to animate—this is one of the essential ways that Michals engages and assumes a narrative relationship with the viewer. This is made more clear when one views the short film *Duane Michals 1939-1997*, which attempts to recreate several of Michals best known sequences via cinema.

Two different techniques were used to animate Michals work: filming the stills for set periods of time and transitioning between them, and the refilming of some sequences as cinema (this is to say with motion, at 24 frames per second). When the stills are presented in film (for example, this is done with the sequence *Things are*

Queer), the director decides for the viewer the length of time that each still is shown, and the rapidity of transition between each still, creating a rhythm of experience for the viewer. With the other strategy, for example the translation of *The Spirit Leaves the Body* into a short film, not only is the time of the piece entirely dictated by the filmmaker, but also the viewer is relegated to the activity of simple, passive experience (this is true for the former example as well). It is clear when Michals work is viewed as an actual cinematic piece that much of the weight and substance of his narratives are lost when they are animated, violating what Kozloff calls the "mythic notions of time that inform Michals sequences" (Kozloff, 37).

This returns to the discussion of Michals form as being that of comics, more specifically his use of time within and between the photographs of an individual sequence. McCloud talks of one fundamental device of the comics genre as being the "fracture of both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" organized within the viewer's mind as a "continuous, unified reality" by the process that he calls "closure" (McCloud, 67). According to his theory, this mental activity on the part of the viewer creates a state of co-authorship, where the artist (Michals in this case) sketches out the skeleton of the narrative, but all of the connections and more importantly all time and events

existing between each panel (or photograph) are created—
with each viewing—by the viewer.

This relationship is essential to the work of Duane Michals. Kozloff (who dismisses Michals relation to comics) agrees with this: "Both artist (Michals) and viewer inversely create a work which asserts a relationship before it declares any content. And in a final, hermetic twist, the content is materialized when the relationship is perceived (Kozloff, 20)." Michals' work is often intended as an intimate communication between himself and the (anonymous) viewer.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this tendency of Michals' work is the piece *Someone Left A Message For You*, one of his more visually simple sequences. All that is visible are fingertips holding a pen and a plane of paper; the sequence consists of the fingertips writing a message for three panels and the pen resting on the paper in the final image. The sequence only describes the act of a sentence being written...except that it is being written in mirror-inverse, so it is difficult to decode. Michals has sprung his trap: the viewer, if they choose to connect and play along, must become involved in order to finish the story. The reward is the sentence "As you read this, I am entering your thoughts" (Michals, "Now" 70). It's a joke, a prank, but also it acts as an example of the relationship that Michaels wants with his viewers. He wants the viewer to feel that he is in communication with them actively

rather than having left an artifact for them to study in his absence. Although the viewer knows that Michals did not leave this sequence specifically for them, still there is the intimation of a personal communication.

Kozloff's rejection of Michals' work being related to the comics form is not well articulated, and perhaps not entirely thought out, potentially springing from a normal bias against comics as a valid genre of artistic expression. He claims that in comics the pictures are silent and the words that are delivered with them are like "movie subtitles, or perhaps TV dialogue for the hearing impaired" (Kozloff, 20). This analogy is of course fundamentally flawed, because both subtitles and closed captioning are added in post-production in order to compensate for deficiencies in select subsets of the intended audience, i.e. those who can not understand the original language, or those who can not hear. Conversely, the text in comics (whether Superman, Maus or in a Lichtenstein painting) is usually a fundamental part of the work, and generally impossible to remove without altering the meaning and substance of the piece.

Kozloff also feels that silent film intertitles and Italian fumetti (photographic comics) are unrelated to Michals' work because the "block script serves as the instant transcription of an utterance" (Kozloff, 20). What is odd about this (apart from mentioning silent film intertitles, which seem obviously unrelated to Michals'

work) is that often the handwritten captions in Michals' sequences are "instant transcription[s] of an utterance." One only has to look at a work like *Person to Person*, with the final caption that is only a quote: "Hello, no Tom isn't here anymore. I know he'll be sorry he missed your call" (Michals, "Real" 111) to see that this is true. Additionally, in many of Michals sequences, for example *The Pleasures of the Glove* (Michals, "Real" 95), *Person to Person* (Michals, "Real" 104) and *Christ in New York* (Michals, "Now" 140) to name a few, the handwriting is the voice of a narrator, which is also a common use of text in comics, occurring probably as frequently as text being used to convey dialogue. Kozloff's best argument against Michals work being related to (or worse simply being in) the comics genre is that "Michals' margin messages... seem to speak to the frame, rather than talk out of it" and that this is significantly different enough from the much maligned comic strip's use of text that "it would be hard to say they owe anything to it" (Kozloff, 20). However, this speaks more about style of presentation, rather than underlying form. Perhaps it is significant that Michals doesn't superimpose his dialogue over the print...however it can also be argued that there are technical reasons why he would write on the margins and not on top of the photograph. As one example, it seems sufficient to point out that black ink might not show well on top of the exposed area of a black and white photograph, especially in the shadow areas. To counter

this, Michals would be forced to introduce further compositional forms in order to ensure a relatively unexposed area on which to write. Beyond adding additional complications to Michals' production cycle, this style would detract from the feeling of immediacy in Michals' work (discussed elsewhere in this paper). To simplify the argument: perhaps it was simply easier for Michals to write on the margins of his photographs than to attempt to replicate "word balloons" in his photographs. It's difficult to say, but Kozloff's separation of text in the margin versus text in the frame (texts which would assumedly operate identically, at any rate) seems contrived and does not hold up to intellectual scrutiny.

Kozloff's only other differentiation of Michals from comics (and other media that integrate text from images) is that Michals' so-called "margin messages" (captions is usually a more appropriate word) "often describe more than can be seen in the photograph, as if he had more to tell than could be conveyed in a picture" (op. cit.). However, this seems to belie Kozloff's unfamiliarity with comics rather than his studied analysis of the medium, given that his comment could as easily be applied to many comics from higher examples like *Maus* to more common mass media works like *Superman* or *Batman*.

Of course, it is difficult to say that Michals drew directly from a comics tradition, because he does not directly quote from or use the traditional devices of

comics (A notable exception to this is the sequence *Amazing Rick Dick-Super Sleuth!* starring Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford. Not only is the work a parody of the detective story, but also incorporates alliteration and silly word plays to an absurd degree; all traditions in the comics form. Of course, it also harkens back to film noir and hardboiled detective novels, so the sequence still does not demonstrate a clear influence of comics on Michals (Michals, "Now" 120).). It is probably unnecessary to attempt to prove either way, because to reclassify Michals as working in the comics tradition is a quixotic task at best, and fails to take into account the large amount of non-sequential work that he created in his lifetime.

The reason that an acknowledgement of Michals' use of the comics form in his sequences is useful is that it is the only genre that does not require significant caveats as one relates Michals' work to it. For example, if Michals is discussed as literature, the pictures need constant explaining as a special case, and vice versa if his work is classified as photography. Clearly his sequence work is a hybrid of text and image, and the genre that accepts these without alteration or caveat is comics. Using the established vocabulary of comics criticism provides a framework for understanding the formal structure underlying his sequential work (The small body of critical works also use Will Eisner's term "sequential art" instead of the word "comics" (McCloud, 5), but attempting to change a genres'

name for instant respectability seems to be a recipe for splitting the genre into "art" and "not-art," instead of gaining critical recognition of the medium as a whole).

Photographic Vocabulary of Michals' Sequences

While Duane Michals uses photographs to provide the visual components of his sequences, he deviates from conventional photographic language and sign systems in many cases, making use of several technical effects in order to build a visual language (or his own visual dialect of photography at any rate) for the purpose of depicting unnatural or supernatural phenomena in his sequences. This was clearly a necessity for Michals, because as Kozloff points out "he took to photography not because it documents reality—and therefore makes something known—but because it confirms the surfaces upon which the mind operates. He wants more than supposition, but has no faith in the truth, at least external truth" (Kozloff, 18). Using obvious camera and darkroom techniques such as shutter blur, (over) dodging and double exposure Michals creates a visual shorthand for complex spiritual and emotional states of being, creating a "maximum of significance...achieved by a minimum, perhaps even a visual insufficiency, of means" (Kozloff, 31).

The most obvious effect (that is to say, the most often exploited) used by Michals is shutter blur. This condition is created simply by leaving the shutter of the

camera open for too long to freeze motion in the exposure. Although it is often a foil for photography novices, shutter blur also has a long tradition of being used to indicate quick or frenetic motion; it is established (or clichéd) enough in the field that it is usually covered as a creative technique in photographic techniques books aimed at amateurs.

For Michals shutter blur is indicative not of rapid movement, but frenetic or indeterminate emotional or spiritual states. At first glance, the blur introduced in the fourth panel of the programmatically titled sequence *The Woman Is Frightened by the Door* (Michals, "Real" 15) seems to indicate a sudden rapid movement initiated by the unexpected opening of a door. However, further examination reveals that her head turning in the third panel is frozen, even though common sense would dictate that in a setting where blur indicates motion, a sudden head turn would be blurred. Rather, it is when the woman realizes the door has opened that she becomes slightly blurred, or transitions into a more frenetic emotional state, although the reason for this is never concluded (a common factor in Michals' sequences). The final frame leaves *The Woman* in a state of extreme blur, resolving the sequence in an uncertain state, full of psychological tension.

In the book *Real Dreams* a possible exception to this tendency of Michals occurs immediately after *The Woman Is Frightened by the Door*, in the sequence *The Violent Act*.

This sequence, depicting a motionless man being approached surreptitiously from behind by another man, being struck and then falling to ground, also uses shutter blur but it is difficult to determine how Michals meant the blur to be read. While it is certainly possible (and relatively plausible) to read the blurred state of the figures as being representative of an abstract state or condition of violence (the victim becomes blurred after being struck), it's equally valid to read the blur as merely indicating rapid motion (Michals, "Real" 19).

Beyond heightened or otherwise unusual emotional states, shutter blur is used to "merely record an invisible transition" as Kozloff--perhaps ironically--writes describing Michals sequences about death (Kozloff 30). *In Death Comes to the Old Lady*, a stationary woman (her motion frozen) is approached from around a corner by a blurred man dressed in a suit (representing death), who by the fourth frame is about to walk in front of her. In the fifth and final frame, death has passed and the woman is replaced by a vertical column of blurred motion as she rises out of the chair (Michals, "Real" 47). Here Michals has used blur not to record movement or emotion, but the transition from the corporeal to the ephemeral (this includes the depiction of Death...after all, what else would the anthropomorphization of death be but a creature of unending transition?).

This use of blurred figures is echoed in the simpler two-frame *Alive and Dead*, but the exact meaning of the

distortion is not as clear. In the sequence, a slightly blurry figure enters a door with his back to the viewer in the first frame (titled *Alive*). The second frame is the same figure entering the door facing the viewer, however the figure is much more blurry than the initial "alive" figure. A reading that would agree formally with the use of shutter blur in *Death Comes to the Old Lady* would be that the sequence describes the crossing of the threshold, the transition from life to death, rather than two discrete states (alive and dead). Read this way the sequence makes use of blur (compounded with the obvious metaphor encoded in the figure moving through a doorway) as indicative of "a process of dissolution" (Kozloff, 41), rather than as a sign for an unusual or supernatural state of being.

In the sequence *The Man in the Room*, Michals reverses the use of shutter blur for the purpose of dissolving the viewer and forcing them through the transition of death. The sequence starts with a man seated with his back to the viewer, and text indicating that the narrator had recently attended the man's funeral. As the sequence progresses, the man and narrator begin to interact and it is gradually revealed (when the narrator realizes that they cast no reflection) that the man is alive and the narrator is dead. In the next frame, the narrator explains "everything began to be soft" accompanying an out of focus image. The next and final frame is even more out of focus with the camera also pulled back from the scene. Here Michals uses the blur

of an out of focus exposure to show the viewer what it is to be inside the transition—"the world stays the same (hard and detailed), but the viewer loses density and placement" (Kozloff, 30).

If Michals uses blurred imagery to indicate a state of transition, he uses a process known as dodging to describe a state of transcendence. Dodging is a darkroom technique that takes advantage of the most fundamental of photographic processes: Photographic emulsions begin as white (or to be precise: clear, or the color of whatever they are suspended on), and darken as they are exposed to light. Dodging, the process of selectively blocking the light that is falling on a photograph as it is being printed, is generally used to slightly lighten an over-exposed area of a photograph. It is difficult to be as certain about dodging's place in Michals' vocabulary, because he exploits this technique in only a few sequences, where he uses it to create supernaturally bright light entities, which could be generalized as "heaven" or "enlightenment" (the interpretative ambiguity between the separate theologies is owed to Michals' own spiritual life, where he moved from Catholicism to Buddhism).

In *A Man Going to Heaven*, a man is seen ascending a staircase from the vantage point of the bottom of the stairs. In the second panel, the top of the stairs (which had been a closed door in the first) erupts into bright white glow that intensifies over the next three panels. The

sequence continues as the man climbs up the stairs until panel five, in which he has disappeared into the light (Michals, "Real" 21).

Similar to *A Man Going to Heaven*, but different because the burst of light comes from within the human figure (this sequence seems to owe more to Buddhism than the former's allusion to Heaven), *The Human Condition* documents a man bursting into light as he stands in the subway and then, through the magic of sandwiched negatives or double-printing, becomes the Milky Way galaxy. This ending echoes the final, imageless frame of *The Journey of the Spirit After Death*: "Oh, to be the light" (Michals, "Journey" 79).

A third example of Michals' use of dodging is subtler, but continues to hold the pattern. In *Christ in New York*, Michals tells the story of an abortive second coming, what Kozloff calls a "parable about the disappearance of faith" (Kozloff, 48). This sequence is unusual for Michals in that each panel is a completely different scene and moment, whereas he usually is concerned with a discrete moment of time (there are other exceptions, of course, for example *Person to Person* and *The Pleasures of the Glove* incorporate multiple scenes—but they do not jump in each frame). Michals' use of dodging in this sequence is to set a halo on the head of the Christ figure. Although on one hand the dodged area could be seen as analogous to a prop, the halo holds a special significance in religious art--also known

as a nimbus it is "a bright cloud, or cloudlike splendour, imagined as investing deities when they appeared on earth" (OED, "nimbus"). With this in mind, it is arguable that the dodged area is representative of a transcendental state, which in this case is embodied within the Christ figure.

The final technical effect that Michals assumes into his own vocabulary is the double-exposure, a process by which two images are exposed onto the same negative. This visual effect is used throughout Michals' sequential work for the purpose of depicting those who inhabit a parallel spirit world invisible to, and yet aware of, the corporeal world.

Unlike Michals' idiosyncratic uses of shutter blur and dodging, here Michals is at least operating within a tradition of using this particular visual illusion as a means of depicting the supernatural world. Harkening back to "spiritual photography" (Höft, 96), the double exposure has long been used by photographers to either simulate or fake the existence of spirits surrounding us.

In Michals' sequences, the double exposure can also be used to picture a sleeper's dream-state, as in *The Young Girl's Dream*, which begins simply with the eponymous young girl sleeping naked on a couch. As the sequence proceeds, a ghostly young man enters the room, seeming to approach her tentatively. By the fourth frame however, he caresses her breast. When the woman reacts with pleasure in the final

frame, the man is gone—banished as she wakes (Michals, “Real” 41).

Generally however, Michals uses the double exposure to show the spirit as it moves around a still extant physical world. In the programmatically titled *The Spirit Leaves the Body*, double exposure is used to depict the spirit sitting up and walking away from a supine body (Michals, “Real” 33). It is never specified whether this is a brief trip (an astral projection, perhaps?) or the final voyage of death. Given Michals career-long and self-admitted obsession over his own death (Michals, “Real” 5), it seems prudent to assume that *The Spirit Leaves the Body* is an early iteration of a theme that occurs consistently throughout Michals’ sequential work—the depiction of the moments of and after death.

A seemingly convenient capstone for discussion of these technical effects that Michals has appropriated for his own visual grammar is the series *The True Identity of Man*. Not a sequence, but almost a reference work to the author’s personal symbology, *The True Identity of Man* is comprised of four images of the same man seated in an identical position at a table. What differs is the state of the man, indicated by both the title and his visual representation. In *Man as Animal*, he is depicted as nude and solid, in opposition to *Man as Spirit*, where he is clothed and translucent.

What breaks Michals norms here is the nude/clothed dichotomy between the animal and spirit man. As Kozloff notes, with Michals "clothed status may imply that one exists only on a mundane level" (Kozloff, 44), however it could reasonably be argued that acting as a representative for humanity, the man pictured assumes a mythic status, as often happens in Michals sequences (Kozloff, 44). What breaks this assumption, however is that the spirit man is clothed and translucent. Given that this is not Michals' normal operating procedure (spirits are always afforded an abstract, mythic status "for the evident reason that wearing jeans, say, would place [them] in a time zone [they] no longer inhabit" (Kozloff, 45).), it should be considered that this series is not totally in line with Michals other works, but it might be holding Michals to too rigid a standard to ask that the same visual effect always have the same metaphorical meaning

Another image in *The True Identity of Man is Man as Energy*, where the figure is replaced with a vertical column of shutter blur that echoes the final frame of *Death Comes to the Old Lady*. Here the blur represents an abstracted and ambiguous state, but it is not completely out of line with Michals' usual metaphors of transition into death or heightened emotional or spiritual state. The final image *Man as God* repeats the use of (over) dodging an area in order to convert the posed figure into a white burst of

light with a man's head. This can be safely said to be operating within Michals' normal milieu.

In a discussion of Michals' visual language, consideration must be given to the "other" half of his sequences: the text. The captions in his work do not function as mere descriptors of the work being presented, but rather they are an integral part of the work—often as important if not more important to the story that Michals is trying to tell through photography.

By writing on the prints, Michals is able to "overthrow the dictate of autonomy of the images and [expand] the mode of expression of his images" (Höft, 85), moving decisively out of the genre of photography and into a new space of hybrid texts, or if preferred Sequential Art (or comics, as discussed earlier).

It is significant that he does not use a printing technology such as presstype, linotronic (or other computer generated) type or a typewriter to add text to his images, but rather writes directly on them with pen and ink. His handwriting functions on several levels to create a unique feeling to his work.

The most obvious effect is that a feeling of intimacy is created automatically by what handwriting signifies to the viewer. Where set type implies an anonymous crafts-person, longevity (harkening back to the origin of type as carved into stone) and mass production, the scrawl of longhand is personal, fleeting and singular. By combining

handwritten text with his images, Michals "recalls the immediacy of family albums and gives the images a strangely apparent authenticity" (Höft, 85).

In addition, Michals' writing often contains scratched out words and other scribbled marks around the edges of the photographs. As Kozloff points out, this is a quality of text usually reserved for drafts or private notes and diaries. By allowing the viewer to access text of this quality, Michals creates a sense of intimate privilege, where "author and reader are linked, their contact personalized, by these handwritten texts that even stumble a little" (Kozloff, 20).

Michals' choice of longhand also serves a practical purpose. The modern, educated brain can absorb printed text effortlessly, and does constantly. Surely, a side effect of this is that printed text can be skimmed and forgotten, or at least be only lightly considered. By scrawling out a slightly hard to read text, Michals creates a "delay mechanism, slowing down reading as if to let thought sink in" (Kozloff, 21).

Closing thoughts

The universe as described by Michals is filled with unusual personages, deeply significant events and mythical stretches of time. This is made more remarkable by the humble tools Michals uses to author his tales: a camera, models, a simple background, a straightforward formalized

narrative structure and a few optical tricks become transformed into works of great emotional depth and impact. It should be noted that these works retain their potency even as digital technologies have greatly altered the tools being used by photographers and writers, and that even at the time that Michals produced most of his sequences, the technology was available for him to make slicker, more refined images. That he chose not to, but rather opted for a simpler method is interesting, and should perhaps be instructive to younger photographers and writers, especially as the distinction between these artists, and indeed the distinction between all artists is fading, and hybrid texts become more familiar.

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