

A Snicket at Halifax c. 1937 by BILL BRANDT

In the industrial towns of Halifax and Newcastle Brandt saw splendid buildings as empty of connection as the facades of De Chirico, separated only by snickets leading to nowhere.

Mark Haworth Booth, introduction to *Shadow of Light* (second edition), London 1977

I was in the features department of the *Birmingham Post & Mail* one evening in 1966 when I saw a review copy of a new book by Bill Brandt entitled *Shadow of Light*. It was an event that irrevocably changed my photography – and probably my life. I had seen some of Brandt's work before, but never a body of his work. I was astonished by the originality and visual impact of this collection of his best work. The snicket picture stayed in my mind as I drove back home after my night shift on the paper.

You can detect the influence - I realized much later – of French photographer Eugene Atget on Brandt's 1930s work. He would have seen Atget's prints in Surrealist artist Man Ray's Paris studio when he worked as the American's assistant in 1929. A fact Tom Cooper and I learnt from Ray himself when we interviewed him in 1974 for *Dialogue with Photography*. When I moved away from photo-journalism in the early 1970s, I sought to imbue my new work with the sort of chiaroscuro effect I so much admired in Brandt's photographs.

I love the dynamic thrust of the snicket's cobbled incline with its sensuous smoothness accentuated by the reflected light off the wet stone sets. The wet handrails become interrupted silver strands rather than physical aids for pedestrians, and the impenetrable black of the gable end of the factory looms ominously like the backdrop to a gothic horror film. It is not surprising that Brandt was influenced by Surrealism with its tendency to subvert the ordinary into the weird and scary. Although pictorially innovative, the original 1930s print has much more detail in it, and less tonal contrast. But his tonal palette became much more exaggerated after the war when he became influenced by the camerawork of *Citizen Kane* and Paris-based photographer, William Klein. The former's menacing deep shadows and wide-angled viewpoint left their mark, as did Klein's high contrast grainy approach. What we used to call *soot and whitewash*. But whatever the antecedents, I was thrilled by the audacity of his visual extremis. I tried to create similar contrast ranges in my work and to react to the light receptors I was seeing in 'ordinary' subject matter, like wet roads, metal surfaces, painted road markings, shop window reflections, streaming condensation, and plastic sheeting.

The most important effect this image, and others by Brandt, had on my early black and white work – the work that first established me as a photographer whose work could live on the same gallery walls as other visual art – was to be bold, and never be content to play safe. Although Tom and I never did get an interview with him for *Dialogue*, Brandt did graciously sign my copy of *Shadow of Light* in 1976. But the most memorable encounter I had with him was two years later when he visited a one-day exhibition I had in Covent Garden.

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He thanked me for sending him an invitation (he was always overwhelming polite) and

spent over an hour looking at my photographs. I asked him if I could use one or two of his images for my upcoming book, *Approaching Photography*, but we both got distracted and he disappeared into the gallery lift.

A few days later, I got a letter saying: 'Please use anything you like from *Shadow of Light*' in your book'.

Paul Hill
621 words