

PREVISUALIZATION, PURISM AND PROPAGANDA



THE DIRECTORIAL IMPERATIVE IN DOCUMENTARY

David Blumenkrantz

Art 462

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I PRE-VISUALIZATION & ACCIDENTS

“While both photographer and painter produce visual images on two-dimensional surfaces, they differ fundamentally in their ways of seeing. In most cases it is the act of painting that absorbs the painter. But this act is highly subjective. His focus is on the canvas itself; his fancy is purely his own. The photographer’s act is to see the outside world precisely, with intelligence as well as sensuous insight. This act of seeing sharpens the eye to an unprecedented acuteness.”

**Berenice Abbott (254-55)*

“Henri Cartier-Bresson photographed Mexican eternity from the Mexican moment, which is the only time that accords universally with the camera. The artist halts momentarily on the crest of the wave for the duration of the photograph, in his hand an instrument the size of his own hand.”

** Carlos Fuentes, 1995 (11)*

Berenice Abbott’s documentary interpretations of New York City were a reaction to her discovery of Eugene Atget’s Paris work. Her sentiments concerning a way of seeing distinctive to photography certainly echo Paul Strand’s declarations on Straight Photography. With the advent of the 35mm Leica and the quickening of photographic processes, photojournalism emerged to maximize this potential. The act of spontaneous “pre-visualization” in photography further accentuated the difference between it and other mediums. In the 1930s, Henri Cartier-Bresson, a Frenchman with a background in both Cubism and Breton’s Surrealist movement, developed his famous theory of the “decisive moment.” Photography, he wrote, implies the “recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things.” Man uses his eye and the camera to “simply register upon the film the decision made by the eye.”

(Cartier-Bresson 384)



Figure 1: *Hyeres, France*, 1932. Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Cartier-Bresson spoke of a “new kind of plasticity” produced by instantaneous lines made when the subject moved. (Figure 1) “But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements are in balance.” The photographer, whose eye is in this moment.” (385) Composition,

Cartier-Bresson insisted, must be a constant preoccupation:

“ . . . but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment . . . if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.” (385)

Cartier-Bresson’s remarkable images, which often juxtapose seemingly contradictory realities, employ a finely developed visual sensibility, evoking an aesthetic response in viewers. Much of his work was intended to expose social injustice, seeking a moral response as well. (Cookman)

The act of pre-visualization is not limited to the editorial interpretations of journalists, however artistic the eye of Cartier-Bresson, W. Eugene Smith, or James Natcheway today. Purists such as Edward Weston, whose work consisted largely of still-lives, also spoke of the importance of seeing photographically:

“Since the recording process is instantaneous, and the nature of the image is such that it cannot survive corrective handwork, the finished print must be created in full before the film is exposed. Until the photographer has learned to visualize the final result in advance, his finished work – if it be photography at all—will present a series of lucky—or unlucky—mechanical

accidents.” (Weston 172)

Weston’s notion that a photograph can result as an accident presumes events before the camera occurred either too quickly, or that perhaps something – an ironic juxtaposition or a subtle visual pun -- did not reveal itself until discovered later in the darkroom. Indeed, photographs made during a chance encounter, or with a fortuitous snap of the shutter often reveal aspects of a scene the photographer was unaware of at the moment he or she was making the image. (McQuire) In genres that rely heavily on candid imagery such as street

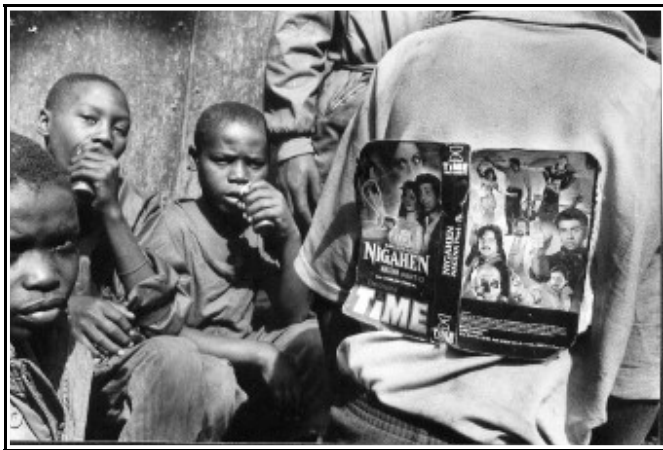


Figure 2: *Street boys sniffing glue in alleyway, Nairobi, Kenya.* 1992. David Blumenkrantz

photography, photojournalism and documentary, anticipating the development of a scenario and seeking to eternalize a moment of Cartier-Bresson’s “plasticity” leaves the photographer wide open to such incidental occurrences. (Figure 2)

His tools were the tripod-bound, large-format field cameras, the sun and moon, a fanatic’s self-righteousness, and infinite patience. In his “Personal Credo,” written in 1943, Adams refused to accept the possibility that any photograph, perhaps especially his, could be the result of anything so arbitrary as an accident:

“A photograph is not an accident—it is a concept. It exists at, or before, the moment of exposure of the negative . . . the ‘machine gun approach’ to photography —by which many negatives are made with the hope that one will be good —is fatal to serious results . . . The accidental contact with the subject and the required immediacy of exposure in no way refutes the principles of basic photographic concept. Truly ‘accidental’ photography is practically non-existent; with pre-conditioned attitudes we recognize and are arrested by the significant moment.” (Adams 379)

Adams' views on photographic purity not only disavowed the role of chance, but also forbade any form of overt directorialism.

II THE DEBATE WITHIN: PICTORIALISM VS. PURISM

“A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense, and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety. And the expression of what one feels should be set forth in terms of simple devotion to the medium—a statement of the utmost clarity and perfection possible under the conditions of creation and production.”

**Ansel Adams, “A Personal Credo,” 1943*

“One of photography’s major struggles has been to free itself from the imperative of realism.”

** A.D. Coleman, “The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition” (438)*

One of the most common misapprehensions about photography concerns the role that *truth* plays in its representations. Because of its realistic nature (*the camera is a mirror with a memory!*) many people assume that photography never lies, and therefore must be used carefully and responsibly-- no manipulation or staging. Historically, such people were called purists, or Purists. If however you accept Roger Seamon's assertion that “photographs are expressive of attitudes toward what is represented,” it's easy to understand how a medium so rife with potential for interpretation can be used so subjectively. (Seamon 247) In this Pictorialist line of thinking, there is nothing wrong with setting up a scene to be photographed.

Propaganda, fashion sense, whimsy, lens distortion, selective cropping, the moment of shutter release, angle of viewpoint, ignorance, a bad breakfast: all are factors in the ability to alter reality through photographic representation. Outside the purist's purview, none of this

must necessarily reflect on the morality or honesty of the photographer. Should a medium that features such simply gained methods of distortion and manipulation of emotions be limited to strict realism alone? In the 1930s, a heated debate, highlighted by a series of articles written by Ansel Adams and William Mortensen in the San Francisco-based magazine *Camera Craft*, centered on just this philosophical divide.

A.D. Coleman, a longtime photography historian and critic, while based at the University of New Mexico, revived and insinuated himself into the center of this debate. He felt compelled to do so when it became clear to him that the history of photography was unfairly biased in favor of the purists, who were writing the books and curating the exhibitions that influenced public opinion. Coleman wrote two important essays on this topic. In 1976, “The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition” first appeared in *Art Forum*, and later in his book Depth of Field (referred to parenthetically as “Directorial”). In 1982, Coleman published “Conspicuous by His Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen” in *Camera Arts* (referred to parenthetically as “Conspicuous”). Both essays were written to explore the differences between the two modes of expression, but also to defend the Los Angeles-based Mortensen, who apparently has been censored from photography history.

More than a battle of egos, the controversy went right to the heart of photography’s nature. “At stake,” Coleman warns, “was a complex matter: it concerned the right of the image-maker to generate every aspect of a photographic image, even to create a ‘false’ reality if required.” (Conspicuous) Before proceeding with details of this debate, some background information on the two antagonists might be instructive.

Ansel Adams and the f/64 Purists

Emerging in California after the Straight Photography movement that flowered in New York during the final years of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession, Purism sought technical perfection and artistic objectivity. Every detail of the negative and the print had to be totally sharp, the tonal values impeccable. Edward Weston, one of the earliest proponents of this genre, somewhat paradoxically wanted "the substances and textures of things appreciable to the point of illusion." (Newhall 188) The camera could see more than the unaided eye, and Weston and

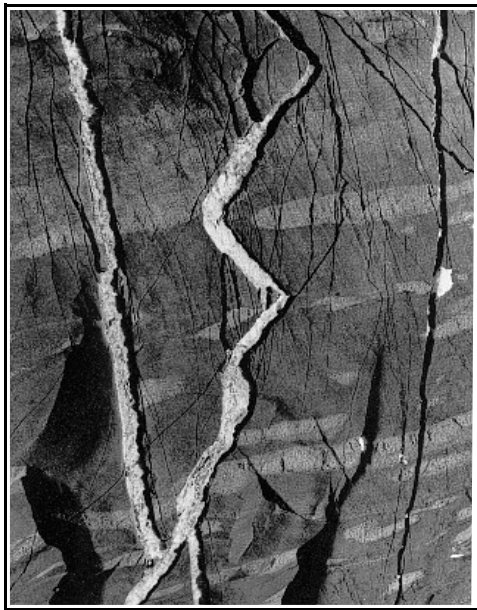


Figure 3: Rock, Glacier Bay National Monument, 1947. Ansel Adams

his colleagues wanted to exploit this quotient of realism. In 1932, Weston, along with Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and others formed Group f/64, named for the aperture setting that ensures maximum depth of field and image sharpness. Using only large format cameras, and refusing to enlarge their negatives, they set about creating stunningly detailed still-lives of everything from bell peppers to mountain ranges.

(Figure 3) Beaumont Newhall, in his book The History

's philosophy:

"Group f/64 formulated an aesthetic that in retrospect now appears dogmatic in its strict specifications: any photograph not sharply focused in every detail, not printed by contact on glossy paper, not mounted on a white card, and betraying any handwork or avoidance of reality in choice of subject was 'impure.'" (Newhall 192)

Group f/64 members felt that these techniques were truer to the precision and unaffected directness of the medium. Photography, they believed, must abandon all efforts to imitate painting, which could only undermine the recognition of photography as a "viable

medium of art in its own right.” (Spaulding 21-22) For a few years they were the most progressive photographic society in America. Even after they disbanded, their influence remained. The term “f/64” came to be used as a general label for straight photography, even for photographers who had never been part of the group. (Conspicuous) Adams of course went on to become the world’s foremost environmental photographer, and today his prints and calendars are still on sale everywhere.



Figure 4: *The Kiss of Peace*, ca. 1867. Julia Margaret Cameron.

The Directorial Mode of Pictorialists

Pictorialism dates back at least to 1864, when Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron blended literary themes with the Romantic visual conventions of Pre-Raphaelite painting. (Figure 4) Dismissed by many as overly sentimental, the new style’s tint of authenticity was powerful enough to attract believers, and Pictorialism as a genre began to flourish, reaching its peak during and of the early 20th Century. Coleman explains how

Pictorialism has over the decades had different meanings and implications:

“Presently it is used to describe bland, pretty, technically expert executions of such clichés as peasants tilling the field, fisherfolk mending nets, sailboats in the sunset . . . as such it is essentially derogatory. Initially though it indicated an adherence to a set of conventions—prescribing styles and subject matter—which were thought to be essential to all fine art.” (Directorial 488)

Much of the imagery they created is today considered silly; much of it was and still appears beautiful, sensually lit and often poignant. Early pictorialists such as Clarence White, Anne Brigman, Gertrude Kasebier and Stieglitz generally retreated from the world of industry,

seeking beauty in nature and among the “comforting enclosures of bourgeois domesticity.”

(Galassi 11) In contrast, there is an underlying attitude in Pictorialism that allows for the use of any tools or methods required for the full realization of the image. These should not be withheld on the basis of any principle, moral or otherwise. *Avant Garde* specialist Man Ray was expressing a pictorialist tendency when he wrote, “A certain amount of contempt for the material employed to express an idea is indispensable to the purest realization of this idea.”

(Directorial 488)

Pictorialists, with their arrangement of objects and people to create compositions and communicate ideas, work in what Coleman calls the “Directorial Mode”:

“Here the photographer consciously and intentionally *creates* events for the express purpose of making images . . .by intervening in ongoing ‘real’ events or by staging—in either case, causing something to take place which would not have occurred had the photographer not made it happen. . . ‘authenticity’ is not an issue, nor is the photographer’s fidelity to it, and the viewer would be expected to raise those questions only ironically. Such images use photography’s overt veracity against the viewer, exploiting that initial assumption of credibility by evoking it for events and relationships generated by the photographer’s deliberate structuring of what takes place . . . There is an inherent ambiguity . . . for even though what they purport to describe . . . would not have occurred without the photographer’s instigation, nonetheless those events (or a reasonable facsimile) did actually take place, as the photographs demonstrate . . . they ask for the suspension of disbelief.” (Directorial 484-85)

Coleman cites an extensive tradition of directorial photography. Any arranging of objects or people in front of the camera is essentially directorial. This encompasses most studio work, still-lives, posed nudes, and formal portraiture. Stereographs, which were mass-produced by the millions and viewed for three decades starting in the 1850s, often consisted of staged scenes from history or the Bible, presented sequentially and narratively. Even the purists, unwittingly or not, employ the occasional directorial nuance. Weston himself “was not functioning directorially when he photographed a dead pelican in the tide pools of Point Lobos,

but he surely was when he placed a green pepper inside a tin funnel in his studio.” (Directorial 485)

The Purging of William Mortensen

“How soon photography achieves the position of a great social and aesthetic instrument of expression depends on how soon you and your co-workers of shallow vision negotiate oblivion.”

**Ansel Adams, in a letter to William Mortensen, 1930’s*

“The problematic aspect of straight photography’s relationship to directorial activity is not the viability of either stance: both are equal in the length of their traditions . . . Rather, it is the presumption of moral righteousness which has accrued to purism, above and beyond its obvious legitimacy as a creative choice.”

**A.D. Coleman*

A consortium of zealous purists, led by Adams and Newhall, expounded the moral righteousness Coleman alludes to. Adams, who started out as an amateur pictorialist himself, converted to straight photography after meeting Paul Strand and viewing his negatives in 1930. They shared the opinion that a medium is best defined by its inherent and unique characteristics, which were not merely stylistic choices but moral imperatives. Coleman notes with irony that they did not consider “photography’s almost infinite adaptability to any style of expression as such a characteristic.” (Conspicuous 482)

Group f/64 emerged in California’s Bay area. In the early 1930s, Sigisimund Blumann, editor of the San Francisco based, pictorialist-leaning magazine *Camera Craft*, waffled between appreciation and rejection of Purism. Writing about Edward Weston, he was both

generous;

“Weston has evolved an art of his own. It is not greater, it is not less than the Pictorialism, which deals with other forms of beauty. He is a poet . . . extracting the beauty out of realities.” (Conspicuous 92)

and sarcastic:

“Do not be discouraged when you see a photograph of a dissected cabbage or a distorted gourd, or the sexual organs of a flower, or a landscape as black as interstellar space. You may not understand it. Neither do the ultramodernists. They shun understanding. They merely feel. There may be beauty and inspiration in the heart of a cabbage, in fact there is when it is properly pickled and cooked . . .” (92)

Blumann’s schizophrenic reaction to Purism reached its peak after a visit to Group f/64’s gallery:

“We came away with several ideas badly bent and not a few opinions wholly destroyed. We were not amused; we could not criticize adversely. The Group f/64 have shown that there is something to say in a 1933 way that still may react on the cultivated senses as expressive of the beautiful. The Group is creating a place for photographic freedom . . . we will concede Weston’s greatness in his field. We consider the field small. We estimate lowly the highest achievement in portraiture of Gourds and Peppers.” (92)

When Blumann went away-- presumably in a state of hopeless confusion-- his successor, George Allen Young invited Adams and Mortensen to write a series of point-counterpoint articles for the magazine. This debate raged on for the better part of a decade, with Mortensen defending the rights of the photographer to use directorial methods, and Adams ranting defensively about “vital checks of taste.” On the surface, a healthy development for photography, it would seem. Each of the antagonists was an extremely accomplished technician who had or would in subsequent years author well-respected “how-to” books.



Figure 5: *Human Relations*, 1932.
William Mortensen

Mortensen, between 1932 and 1935, ran the Mortensen School of Photography in Laguna Beach, where some 3,000 students took his courses. He worked almost entirely in the studio, creating elaborate symbolist allegories, filled with demons, grotesques, and beautiful women, often ravaged. (Figure 5) His recurrent themes of madness, death, corruption, torture and occultism, though imbued with a romantic sensibility, and his use of

techniques—paper negatives, gum and bromide prints, combination printing, easel tilting and hand-drawn elements-- outraged Adams, Newhall and their followers. (96) In the course of their *Camera Craft* debate, Mortensen published the provocative “Quest for Pure Form,” a self-portrait that openly mocked Purism. (Figure 6)

Adams’ moral outrage eventually escalated into outright hatred:

“ . . . briefly put he wanted him dead, and said as much on several occasions. In a letter to Mortensen, meant for the debate but never published, Adams waxed positively vitriolic: ‘how soon photography achieves the position of a great social and aesthetic instrument of expression depends on how soon you and your co-workers of shallow vision negotiate oblivion.’” (95)

Philosophical differences aside, Mortensen’s commitment to photographic excellence is beyond question. His printing, according to Coleman, who tracked down the archives of the deceased artist, was “of

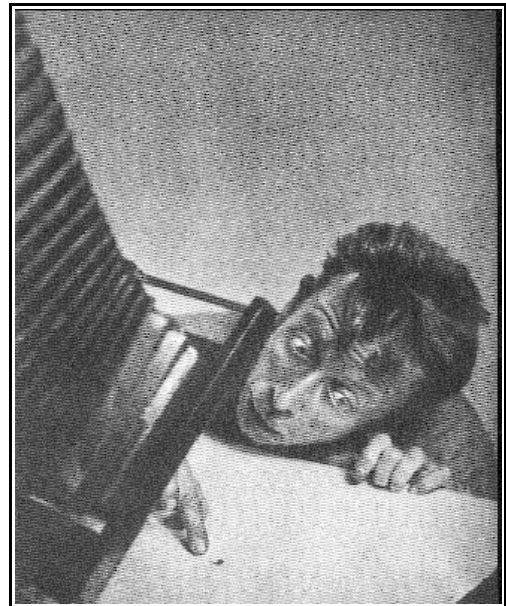


Figure 6: *The Quest for Form*, ca. 1940.
William Mortensen

frequently virtuosic.” In his books and magazine articles, Mortensen wrote of his concern for

“the expressive quality of the original print as a crafted object.” (97) His *magnum opus*, Monsters and Madonnas: A Book of Methods, was an oversized volume with “excellent reproductions and explanations of his aesthetic and techniques.” (94) Today, this book is extremely rare. (I located a copy online for \$350.00). His instructional books, which employ satirical humor to cushion the heavy scientific content, were “from the standpoint of contemporary pictorialism, what Ansel Adams’s volumes on craft were in relation to the so-called purist aesthetic: the invaluable codification and clear exposition of hermeneutic principles.” (94) In fact, Adams technical expertise is due in some part to Mortensen. Coleman’s research revealed that Adams, while writing his own series of technical manuals, had borrowed heavily from articles written by John L. Davenport, that were published in U.S. Camera Annual in the early 1940s. Davenport in turn had learned a lot of technical information from Mortensen, even congratulating him on one of his books with a letter reading, “it will be a landmark in photography.” (111)

In short, Coleman characterizes Mortensen as “the model for his generation of pictorialists; and the current generation’s.” (97) Duane Michals work from the 1960s and after comes closest to approximating Mortensen’s style, (Figure 7) though one would probably have to look at Joel Peter-Witkin’s orchestrated allegories (which go much further than Mortensen ever did) to find a contemporary parallel in terms of pure shock value, as Oscar G. Rejlander meets William Mortensen.



Figure 7: *Primavera*, 1984. An example of Duane Michals’ “overpainted photographs”

While studying the Purism-Pictorialism debates of the 30s and 40s, Coleman noticed that references to the debates were usually brief and superficial, but “while the purists

were identified and quoted, the pictorialists involved were never allowed to speak for themselves.” (106) So, in spite of Mortensen’s obvious talent and influence, the slaughter was on:

“(Mortensen) was actually purged from the history of photography in what seems a deliberate attempt to break the movement’s back. He disappeared from photographic history at the peak of his creative life, at the height of his fame and influence, and certainly not by his own volition.” (93)

Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, who had established themselves as preeminent authorities on modern photography, were entangled in elaborate personal and professional relationships with members of the Group f/64, particularly Weston and Adams. (95) Together, they went to great lengths to discredit Pictorialism in general and Mortensen in particular. The creation of the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Photography, with Newhall as director and Adams as his consultant, made the purist purge “official policy of the contemporary art establishment.” In 1940, the names of “virtually all pictorialists” had been omitted from MoMA’s giant exhibit, “Photography 1839-1927.” This came in the wake of Adams’ “The Pageant of Photography” exhibition, which toured the country *sans* Pictorialism, in 1939-40. In 1941, Nancy Newhall piled on with her diatribe “What is Pictorialism?” in which she dismissed the entire genre, its techniques and methods. (Conspicuous 96)

It gets worse: in the 1937 and 1964 editions of Newhall’s supposedly definitive History of Photography, Mortensen’s name is never mentioned. This inspired Coleman to write his first essay on the topic, in which he took Newhall to task. During a photography conference in 1981, Coleman surprised the gathering by speaking on the issue of the Mortensen purge. On the spot, Newhall retorted that he found Mortensen’s work “perverse,” adding that it “was *his* history and he could disinvite whomever he pleased.” In the midst of a Guggenheim funded

revision, Newhall promised that he was at last going to mention Mortensen—“but only to discredit him!” (108) In the 1982 edition, this obligatory mention ran unaccompanied by samples of Mortensen’s work:

“Group /64 formulated an aesthetic that . . . was a violent reaction to the weak, sentimental style then popular with pictorial photography in California, as seen particularly in the anecdotal, highly sentimental, mildly erotic hand-colored prints of William Mortensen.” (Newhall 192)

Adams’ antipathy toward Mortensen did not diminish with time, either. In 1980, at the height of his own personal fame and fortune, the legendary photographer demanded that a small Mortensen exhibit scheduled to run concurrently with a traveling retrospective of his work in Oakland be closed to the public during his opening, otherwise he would withdraw his own exhibit. (Conspicuous)

Although I’ve never been an enthusiastic adherent of Pictorialism, I find it easy to identify with Coleman’s opposition to the shabby treatment of Mortensen. Arguing that it was the serializations of Mortensen’s books that sold out press runs of *Camera Craft*, and that it was therefore he who provided the verbal and visual forum for Group f/64, Coleman takes Adams and his collaborators to task:

“When considering his eloquent, elegant, and indefatigable championing of the pictorialist stance—under the constant fire of such purist big guns as Adams, Weston, and Nancy Newhall — in a controversial public debate that stretched out over a decade, his absence from the history books reveals itself to be the consequence not of inadvertent oversight but of deliberate omission. As such, it is a serious breach of the responsibilities and ethics of historianship.” (94)

In his conclusion, Coleman reassumes the mediator’s role, depersonalizing the debate while advocating for tolerance and acceptance of both photographic styles:

“It would be foolish to dismiss either of these photographic philosophies as insignificant or inferior, since they represent one of the quintessential dichotomies of photographic theory and practice, and are most meaningful when considered dialectically, in relation to each other.”

(105)

There is some irony, and even poetic justice, in the saga of Adams v. Mortensen. In the footnotes, Coleman reveals that The Center for Creative Photography, started at Adams' insistence to archive his own work, now also houses virtually all of Mortensen's work. Donated by photo historian Deborah Irmas, who had acquired it from Mortensen's widow, "it sits in the same temperature and humidity controlled storeroom, breathing the same air. Wherever he may be, I suspect Adams is not overjoyed . . ." (112)

The Purism/Propaganda Divide

"The world is going to pieces and people like Adams and Weston are photographing rocks!"

**Henri Cartier-Bresson (Spaulding 25)*

"Because of their direct sensory appeal, pictures are perhaps the most effective form that propaganda can take . . . The human comedy is his. Joining with the sardonic amusement of the satirist, he may castigate human absurdities, obscenities, and brutalities, and seek the reform of humanity by revealing to it its own depravities."

**William Mortensen (Conspicuous 104)*

There's little wonder Adams chose Mortensen as his whipping boy. He seemed to need one, to establish a moral position that would help to legitimize his vision. For aside from his battle for purity with the "anti-Christ," as he would describe his rival in later years, Adams was walking a

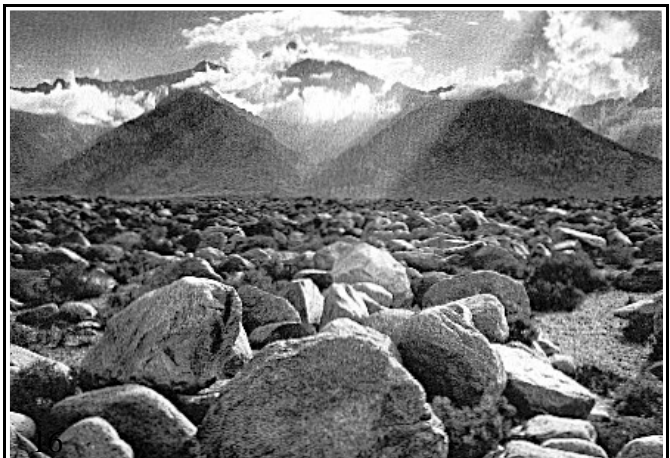


Figure 8: *Mount Williamson-Clearing Storm, 1944.*
Ansel Adams

fine line between legitimacy and ridicule with the social realists, who felt that artists should address the political issues of the day. Adams had entered the 30's with an apolitical, "art for art's sake" approach which had initially left him scornful of social realism. Eventually he began to use his art to not only express his love of nature, but also to build a constituency for its preservation. (Figure 8) With the onset of the Great Depression, many critics questioned the validity of modernism's insularity and theories, typified by Group f.64's purist principles. (Spaulding) Adams, in response to Cartier-Bresson's public observation, managed to muster enough self-righteous indignation to write this to Weston, in 1934:

"I still believe there is real social significance in a rock—a more important significance therein than in a line of unemployed. For that opinion I am charged with inhumanity, unawareness—I am dead, through, finished, a social liability, one who will be liquidated when the 'great day' comes. . . trust our intuition in respect to what is beautiful and significant—to believe that humanity needs the purely aesthetic just as much as it needs the purely material."

Weston, who lived and worked among Rivera and Orozco in the period just after the Mexican Revolution, but chose not to photograph "overtly political themes," commiserated with his colleague:

"I agree with you that there is just as much 'social significance' in a rock as in a line of the unemployed. All depends on the seeing . . . If I saw an interesting battle between strikers and police, I might be tempted to photograph it—if aesthetically moved. But I would record the fight as a commentator, regardless of which side was getting licked." (Spaulding 26)

Adams had very specific notions about propaganda. While he believed that comment was legitimate in art, and that all art was "delicate propaganda of some sort," he felt that any effort to use the photo-document as a tool to "motivate the social aspects of the world" would result in a loss of aesthetic integrity. (Conspicuous 104) Regarding pure documentary, he admitted respect for top practitioners such as Lange, Evans, Van Dyke and Bourke-White, while criticizing those aspects (especially the propagandistic) that he felt undermined



Figure 9: *Japanese-American Internees at Manzanar, 1943.*
Ansel Adams

photography as a fine art. (Spaulding 25) In 1943 Adams worked with Dorothea Lange on the Manzanar Japanese Internment Camp documentary, located near his Yosemite National Park base. While some may feel that he did so to appease his detractors, Adams would

the human story unfolding in the encirclement of desert and his photography “in some creative way with the tragic momentum of the times.” (Armor xvii) Out of his element, Adams’ lone foray into documentary, while exhibiting his usual technical flair and portraiture skills, lacked the distinctive style of his trademark environmental work, and has been described by Coleman as “perfunctory.” (Figure 9)

III DIRECTORIAL TECHNIQUE IN DOCUMENTARY

“To insist that realism is the very essence of photography, does not, as it might seem, establish the superiority of one particular procedure or standard; does not necessarily mean that photo-documents are better than pictorial photographs. Photography’s commitment to realism can accommodate any style, and approach to subject matter.”

** Susan Sontag*

The use of the directorial mode in photography extends beyond Pictorialism. As Sontag contends, the concept of “realism” needn’t be limited to pure, totally objective reportage.

Documentarians are expected to function as sociologists with cameras, which tends to obscure the artistic ambitions of influential



figures such as Lange and Evans. (Curtis)

Journalists regularly pose portrait subjects, or choose certain angles to create an emphasis consistent with their personal vision. Figure 10: *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, ca.1865. Alexander Gardner

Confederate soldier for compositional effect to make his famous *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*. (Figure 10) Paul Strand virtually cast his book on an Italian village, having the town mayor line up the residents so he could pick out the most photogenic. (Directorial) Freelancing for the *Los Angeles Times*, I was instructed to carry light stands, umbrellas, and other equipment normally associated with studio work. In fact, it's safe to say that in newspapers and newsmagazines, other than the occasional feature essay, the only non-directorial photographs are "spot news," live performance, or sports action.

Documenting relief and development programs in Africa, my priority was to locate and make images of natural, candid events and moments. However, I would occasionally need to arrange a few things, in order to illustrate the points I needed to make about water



Figure 11: *Woman with Tank*, Uganda, 1988. D.Blumenkrantz

development, education, medical, street children or refugee issues. In doing so, I experienced no guilt: I felt that the ends justified the means. Purism was fine, but there was a greater message that I wanted to communicate. The photograph of the

nk was not "staged" in the sense that I

brought the woman to the tank, or the tank to the woman, or even instructed the woman to assume the defiant posture caught on film. (Figure 11) The woman lived in close proximity to

this monument of civil destruction and violence, and because I felt that her pregnancy would add a certain poignancy to the image, I chose her from a group of others I found selling fruit along the roadside. Using a gentle approach, I was able to convey the sincerity of my intentions, and the subject reacted in a cooperative and natural manner.



Figure 12: *Untitled*, ca. 1990.
Fremenitos Stefanos

An extreme example of the directorial mode is shown in a dramatic image staged and photographed by Stefano Fremenitos, a former soldier I met while running a photography workshop for the government of Eritrea in 1992. (Figure 12). The placement of the skull of a fallen African, on top the American food relief drum set directly beside a Soviet shell, is a classic illustration of the effects of the Cold War on the countries caught in the middle. It is also an indication of

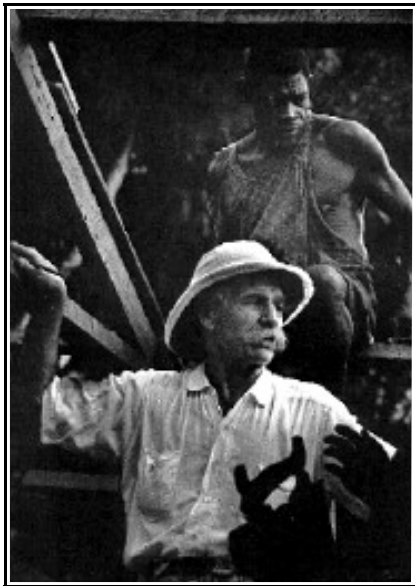
ial imperative in documentary photography, particularly when

there are persuasive motivations involved. The negative for this photo is one among more than ten thousand taken by rebel photographers, developed and printed in makeshift darkrooms without the simple luxury of piped water. Stored in virtual anonymity in government offices in Asmara, only a handful of people outside of Eritrea have seen these images.

On a grander scale, (meaning examples that have been widely seen in our media-oriented Western culture), some of the most influential and public photography ever made include several examples of directorial technique. Documentary pioneer Lewis Hine's campaign to raise the public's awareness of child labor abuses at the beginning of the 20th century were emboldened by the belief that "the art of photography lay in its ability to *interpret* the everyday world." (emphasis mine) To Hine, "straight" photography meant a

responsibility to the truth of his vision, a consideration that superceded a purist's approach to photographic technique. (Trachtenberg 240)

Put bluntly, nobility of purpose and commitment to human betterment do not alone guarantee success. Aesthetic quality and technical expertise are what draw the viewer in for a closer look at the image. (Curtis) W. Eugene Smith, who from the 1940s to the 1970s was considered America's preeminent photojournalist, was known for intense darkroom manipulations, often using bleach to brighten the eyes of subjects whose features were partially



obsured by the deep shadowed lighting he employed. In an extreme case of the poetic license Smith was known to take, the lead photo for an essay on Dr. Albert Schweitzer, taken in Lambarene, Gabon, and published in *Life*, was made from a composite of two separate negatives. The combination print placed the doctor in front of a cross of timbers, which appeared to rest on his shoulders. In the foreground, the silhouette of another worker completed the composition.

(Figure 13) As biographer Tim Hughes explained, "Smith's objective was a 'truth' that Figure 13: *Dr. Schweitzer*, 1954. W. Eugene Smith

Superficiality, he had come to believe, was the greater lie." (Hughes 8)

The work of Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers during the Great Depression, widely regarded as the penultimate in documentary expression, had its share of directorialism. While academics like Sontag might find it perfectly natural that "photography's commitment to realism can accommodate any style," Coleman, speaking of the "religious discourse between image-maker and viewer," explains "responsive" photography:

"The viewers' engagement with these images usually involves a conscious interaction with the

photographer's sensibility. However, the photographer is still presumed not to interfere with the actual event, though . . . that line is hard to draw. In theory, such a photographer is simply free to impose his/her understandings of and feelings about the `real' event. . . the viewer is made equally aware of both" (Directorial 484)

In his study of FSA documentary technique, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth, James Curtis clarifies: ". . . praise for the FSA collection as a repository of revealed truth partakes of the widespread public belief in the inherent honesty and authenticity of all documentary photographs." (Curtis vii) The viewer, Curtis adds, "promises not to examine the photographer's motives or to investigate the genesis of the final print." (vii)

Well, not *all* viewers keep that promise. Reaction to the arrangement of subject matter and posing of people by three of the FSA's best-known photographers: Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans, challenges these "widespread public beliefs." Rothstein in particular, it will be seen, was pilloried for having "violated the spirit of documentary." (Curtis 76) This "spirit" links us to the moral imperative which assumes that propagandistic motives notwithstanding, documentary's responsibility to pure realism is essential. In practice however, in the hands and through the eyes of an artist like Evans, the documentary is more likely to approximate the medium's modernist role "as a cross between absolute fact and essentialist art." (Druckrey 4)

Arthur Rothstein's Skull



Rothstein once observed, "The lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print." (Stott 29) The two being interchangeable,

the person looking at a documentary photograph is in a sense present when the shutter is snapped, and therefore is at the mercy of the photographer's directorial whims. Two of the most contentious examples of manipulation in American documentary involve Rothstein, who at twenty-one was the youngest member of Stryker's team. Starting in the shadow of Lange and Evans, Rothstein took a series of photographs that suddenly made him the best known member of the staff. In May of 1936, Rothstein was sent to the Badlands of South Dakota to document the drought conditions that had ravaged much of the Great Plains. Finding the sun-bleached skull of a steer, Rothstein made multiple photographs of the object, moving it around as a one would a prop. He placed the skull in locations intended to illustrate the effects of overgrazing, and shot close-ups of it on parched, cracked ground, in positions that would deepen the shadows and create a more dramatic graphic effect. (Figures 14 & 15) From a purely photojournalistic perspective, this constitutes an outright ethical transgression. Not so however, when done in documentary style with propagandistic motives. Stryker, who had directed Rothstein to seek out drought photos, was ecstatic with the skull series and released them to the national press. (One imagines Stryker's reaction to be quite different had the prop been a human skull such as Freminitos used in Eritrea).

Rothstein's skull pictures were seen all over the country, as a backdrop to FDR's special trip to the Great Plains to investigate the effects of the drought. Things turned ugly when the *Fargo Evening Forum*, defensive over the depiction of their area as the center of the drought, charged the Resettlement Administration with photographic fakery and fabricating drought conditions. "There never was a year that this scene couldn't be produced, even in years when rainfall levels were far above normal," their editorial raged. Calling Rothstein's gaffe "a gem among phony pictures," they claimed similar images could easily be found in other parts of the country, dismissing the skull as a "moveable prop, which comes in handy for photographers who want to touch up their pictures with

a bit of the grisly.” (Curtis 75)

Rothstein’s skull photos increased the anxiety level at the FSA, which was already facing the specter of being disbanded due to heavy congressional criticism and cost considerations. The Republican-controlled press, eager to find reasons to condemn New Deal methods, criticized the FSA’s work as a beaurocratic disaster, referring derisively to the photographers as “propagandists.” (Curtis 76) When the negatives proved that he had manipulated subject matter, the criticism grew more intense. “The whole resettlement program is a ghastly fake,” raged one Pennsylvania editor, “. . . promoted by fake methods similar to those used by ordinary confidence men.” Stryker kept his cool, even finding humor in the situation. He had a *papier-mache* skull made for use as a paperweight, and ordered his staff to prepare a Christmas card using the infamous skull. (Curtis 75)

Rothstein’s documentary malpractice extends to another directorial episode. For his famous picture “Fleeing a Dust Storm,” which depicts a father and two children leaning into the wind while heading for shelter, he reportedly directed the scene to create the desired spacing. Despite his protests, this was later proven when a previously unseen negative was discovered, which demonstrated clearly that Rothstein had experimented with at least one alternative composition in the making of this picture. (Curtis)

Dorothea Lange and the *Migrant Mother*

“The immensely gifted members of the FSA . . . would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject’s face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation and geometry.” (Sontag 6)

Dorothea Lange is often thought of as the “humanist” among the FSA photographers. Her

portraits of displaced farmers and families on the move are appropriately emotive, and capture the anxiety of “hard times” more personally than most photographers. Lange’s approach typifies the difficulty documentarians have in separating their personal values from what Curtis calls the “heartfelt need to communicate with (their) contemporaries in terms they would understand.”

(Curtis 47) On the door of her darkroom, she kept this quotation by Francis Bacon:

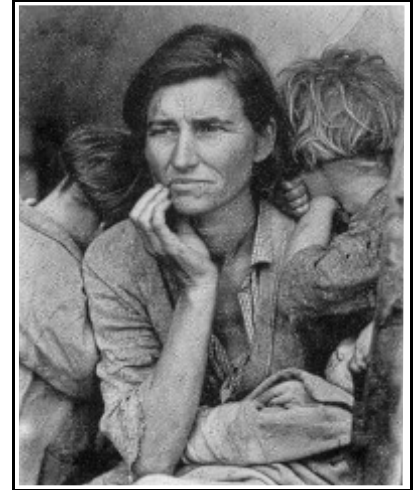
**The contemplation of things as they are
Without substitution of imposture
Without error or confusion
Is in itself a nobler thing
Than a whole harvest of invention**

Like most documentary photographers, Lange believed that her role was that of impassioned, clinical observer, and to stray from this credo was to record one’s preconceptions. Yet Lange’s background was in studio photography, and it was natural for her to work *with* people as she photographed them. Thus she frequently posed her subjects. Curtis:

“This is not to argue that Lange broke faith with the documentary tradition, but only that our understanding of that tradition is somewhat limited. Recent definitions of documentary have concentrated on the act of taking pictures and the photographer’s motives: honesty, directness, and a lack of manipulation.” (47)

Her constant and apparently successful search for representative expressions and body language to illustrate her editorial intent raises the question: is true objectivity possible, or even desirable? Considering that such use of directorial technique is not uncommon, perhaps we should look at the artist’s role in the production of propaganda as necessary, and base our judgments not on the photographer’s motives, but on the cause he or she is representing.

Lange's most famous image, *Migrant Mother*, is a classic example of the directorial technique. (Figure 16) Her meeting with the subjects of this iconic image occurred, as is often the case, by chance. Heading home after a long day of driving from one Californian migrant site to another, Lange passed a pea-pickers camp. After driving on for twenty miles or so, she suddenly (and intuitively) turned around and went back to the camp. Here she



came upon the woman and her several children. Her instincts took over:

Figure 16: *Migrant Mother*.
Dorothea Lange

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not know how I explained my presence or my camera." (Curtis 49)

Lange's contact sheet includes a series of five photographs, showing the gradual progression of the photographer's imposition into the lives of the unfortunate family. It also reveals that Lange directed different children in and out of the viewfinder, until she finally achieved the tightly composed, Madonna-like image the world has come to know. The look of worry on the mother's face achieved the photographer's -- and indeed the FSA's -- desired effect of epitomizing the struggle and helplessness of the Dust Bowl refugees. The subject, Florence Thompson, a historically anonymous figure, died of cancer in 1983, eighteen years after Lange had passed away. Whether intuitive or premeditated, directorial or propagandistic, Lange's efforts created an image that helped raise almost \$30,000 for Thompson's medical expenses, nearly 50 years later.

Why Walker Evans Didn't Cheat

"Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word. The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never called a document, though it

certainly can adopt that style.”

** Walker Evans, explaining his view of the documentary genre, in 1971*

Walker Evans, with a well-deserved reputation as the “exemplar of documentary styling,” also employed directorial methods in his depiction of social realism. Evans was one of the first photographers hired by Roy Stryker. With his aloof artist’s mien and relatively small output, he gradually frayed Stryker’s nerves. Seemingly unconcerned with the bureaucratic demands of a government position, he was nonetheless allowed tremendous leeway. To the average viewer, his photographs were accepted as a staid and listless version of the more heroic propaganda being produced. More sensitive viewers detected the underlying beauty of his images, and this included his boss at the FSA. (Stott 273)

While most of his colleagues had switched to hand-held cameras, Evans preferred to stay with the clarity of the large format, 8x10 camera. He sought out what he termed the “vernacular” in American culture, photographing the possessions and symbols he felt lent dignity and meaning to the lives of his subjects. Rather than seeking to portray poverty with detailed candid exposures of individual suffering, he worked slowly and deliberately. The people he photographed had plenty of time to prepare and adjust, even “defend” themselves against the camera. (Curtis) This democratization of the process resulted in striking portraits, with the subjects usually gazing intently into the camera.

While other proponents of “straight” photography admitted to the occasional technical manipulation, or the need to pose subjects, Evans outwardly denied this, and argued for purity. He worked with basic equipment, and while he sometimes indulged in the liberal cropping of certain images to enhance composition, he refrained from overprinting his negatives. Like Lange, aware of the inability to attain total objectivity, he idealized the documentarian’s role. In 1972, he told an

interviewer:

“You don’t touch a thing. You manipulate if you like when you frame a picture, one foot one way or one foot another. But you are not sticking anything in.” (Curtis 24)

This statement does not stand up to scrutiny, particularly when applied to Evans’ images of Alabama sharecroppers in 1936, which resulted in his most influential work, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. In pursuit of an artful rendering of reality, the photographer often arranged subject matter and posed his subjects. In some of his best compositions, depicting the interiors of the sharecroppers’ homes, household items and furniture were rearranged at his insistence. (Figure 17) “I can’t stand a bad design or a bad

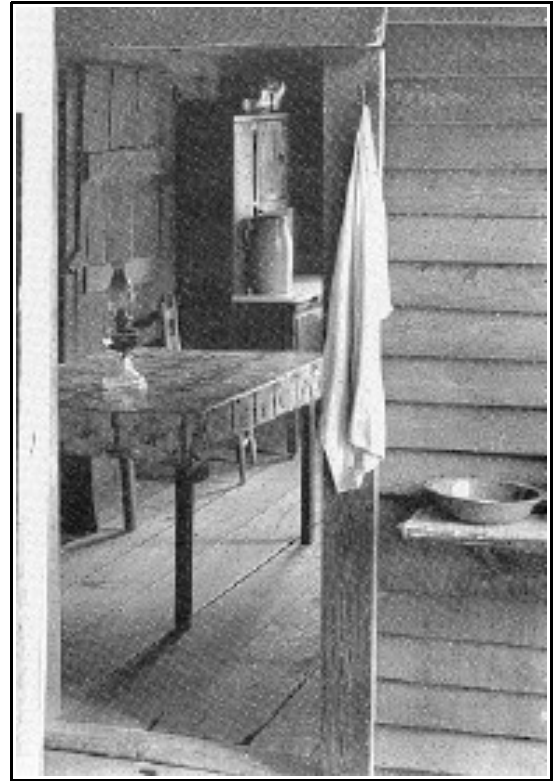


Figure 17: *Floyd Burrough's Home, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.* Walker Evans³

object in a room,” he once admitted. In fairness, Cu
mislead the public or betray the tenants. By focusing on their strengths and not their hardships, he sought to reveal the order and beauty he believed lay beneath the surface of their poverty. His efforts to ennoble and dignify the sharecroppers necessitated a departure from his credo, as Evans imposed his own love of neatness and symmetry on their lives. (Curtis)

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