

MILES ORVELL

The Real Thing

IMITATION AND
AUTHENTICITY IN
AMERICAN CULTURE,

1880 - 1940

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the chaotic album of American life, and provided with the bare bones of explanation, play a terrible searchlight upon a crumbling economic order and light up the path to something better."⁶¹

Bourke-White was only the best known of a younger generation of photographers—Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, Berenice Abbott—who, beginning in the mid-1930s were to exploit the documentary power of the photographic image. In some ways the modernist sensibility that had developed in the teens and 1920s, with its commitment to photography as an *art* form, albeit a uniquely modern one, was at odds with the documentary mode. Stieglitz, who by the 1930s was already an old man, was virtually immune to the changes in the world below his hotel window. But even Strand, who had become involved in left-wing documentary filmmaking during the 1930s, reviewed Dorothea Lange's *An American Exodus* from the standpoint of earlier aesthetic standards: "If books like this are to have their maximum value, then it is clear that their basic material, the photographs, must be more than documentary records."⁶² What the younger generation shared was a sense of urgent need that pervaded the whole discourse of the documentary culture of the 1930s. The immediacy of the image superseded, for many, the problem of aesthetic form. Yet the reverence for the objectivity of fact, the conception of the camera as a technological artifact peculiarly in tune with the modern age, the effort to render the exact feel and reality of things—all articles of firm belief on the part of the modernist photographers—were adapted as part of the foundation for a new generation of photographers who began working in the late 1920s and 1930s and for whom an overt description of the geographical and industrial and social landscape was a defining purpose.

The younger generation of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers, working under the direction of Roy Stryker, took a direct approach to the problems of the Depression, picturing scenes that would predispose the viewer toward needed legislation and social change. For it was clearly understood that the very purpose of the photographic information unit that Stryker headed was to supply pictures that would promote the government's programs. The individual photographers working for Stryker all inevitably (and deliberately) possessed a unique style and point of view, but their role as government workers was to gather information, and not to be *artists*. And to the extent that they were following instructions from Washington,

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fulfilling stated needs for specific kinds of pictures (erosion, floods, parched lands, FSA rehabilitation projects, etc.), the pictures seem at times interchangeable. There were some images that were reminiscent of classic modernist photography, where an abstract design captured the viewer's attention, but the overwhelming majority of documentary photographs of the 1930s feature *people*, not things—ordinary farmers, migrant workers, the urban poor, some industrial laborers. And the power of the photographs often derived from the uncanny effect of seeing people in situations that simulated normal activity but yet conflicted sharply with implicit norms: here are children reading a book in a living room papered with newspaper; here is a family gathered around a kitchen table for a meal that seems foodless; here are a mother and child in rags. By their facsimile representation of “normality” the photographs almost mock their subjects, although in no personal way. Technology is a recurrent theme, but its treatment is not celebratory; instead, factories appear ominous on the horizon, tractors stand menacingly in farm fields, evidence of the mechanization of farming that, during the 1920s and 1930s, hastened soil erosion and the displacement of farmers from the dust bowl. The question raised earlier in the century, of whether people would succeed in mastering the machine, seemed to be answered in the negative in these photographs of unemployment lines and idle factories.

Yet the mystique of the camera, a mystique born amid the cultural uncertainties induced by rapid technological change in the early twentieth century, survived the Depression. Indeed, the new uncertainties about technology gave to the camera, once more, a kind of salvational role. If it could no longer be taken as a symbol of man's mastery of the machine, it could still serve as a symbol of truth, of moral responsibility, of a commitment to “the fact” that would yet result in a victory over irrational economic forces. As Stryker himself put it, “By the precision of their instrument, by the very mechanical limitations of shutter, lens, and film, they [photographers] are invested with credibility; simple honesty will render to their pictures the dignity of fact; feeling and insight will give their fraction of a second's exposure the integrity of truth.”⁶³ And the passage from Francis Bacon that Dorothea Lange had posted on her darkroom door for years might serve the whole group as a motto: “The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without

contrast blue
expectation
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people
vs
machine

the camera
shows
the "real"

error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention."⁶⁴

But the emphasis on fact over invention would seem at times more a matter of style than substance. The problem, as Stryker put it, was that the "documentary photographer feels obliged to bring home more than a cold record. Somehow he has to incorporate into that rectangle which he has cut out from the surrounding therefore formless reality, what the real thing sounded like, what it smelled like—and most important, what it felt like."⁶⁵ In achieving that goal—what the real thing felt like—the documentary photographers developed a style that, ironically, returned to the nineteenth-century mode of typological representation, where the particular stands for the larger category of experience. Documentary style during the 1950s ranged from the presentation of stark particulars, as in the Federal Writers' Project guidebooks, to the representation of allegorical types, as in the Federal Theater's Living Newsreels; somewhere in the middle zone, where the particular became universalized, were the FSA photographs.⁶⁶ The photographer's skill was to capture the subject at the moment of maximum drama or pathos, the sum of FSA imagery constituting a typology of theatrical gesture. Consider the range of postures: Ben Shahn's image of a sharecropper's wife, hands crossed in front of her, gripping her arms, her face contorted in suffering; or the more leisurely gravity of a couple on their porch in a Russell Lee photo; or the pensive dignity of Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother," her children clustered about her, one hand poised delicately at the corner of her mouth; or Lange's quite different shot of a plantation owner, his knee aggressively and possessively perched on the fender of a car, a huddle of black workers behind him.⁶⁷ These are all images of "what it felt like," studies of human posture as an expression of a state of mind. We can feel the presence of the photographer in these images, the tacit delight in the ironies of juxtaposition, the use of a real-life stage setting which could not be better if the photographer had deliberately placed the props there.

Which is exactly what the photographer, in many cases, was in fact doing. Arthur Rothstein's cow skull, posed several times on the parched mid-Western earth, is the most flagrant example (it caused a political brouhaha when the posing was uncovered by the *New York Herald Tribune*, no friend of Roosevelt), but there are many others.⁶⁸ Rothstein explained how he directed one of the most famous of all

turn to
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Depression shots, "The Duststorm": "The little boy was asked to drop back and hold his hand over his eyes. The farmer was asked to lean forward as he walked. Finally the whole scene was made to take place in front of the shed."⁶⁹ If documentaries of the 1930s often look stagy, like still shots from a Hollywood movie, it is because they were indeed so often staged. Rothstein's rationale was simply to enhance the effect, to focus attention on the significant: "Provided the results are a faithful reproduction of what the photographer believes he sees," Rothstein wrote with unimpeachable self-qualification, "whatever takes place in the making of the picture is justified."⁷⁰ FSA documentary was conceived, in short, as a probable fiction, a credible facsimile.

Stryker's best-known photographer, the one whose work would stand out as the definitive codification of Depression America, was Walker Evans, who was fond in later years of picturing his year with the FSA as essentially a tour of the United States at the government's expense. Stryker and Evans must be seen, finally, in opposition to one another, but to a large degree Evans shared with Stryker, even anticipated, the latter's broad goal of creating a visual bank of information about the United States. Evans had written in 1931, several years before the formulation of the government's photography unit, of the need for a new application of the camera. Reviewing several books on photography for the little magazine, *Hound and Horn*, Evans called for a fresh exploration of the photographic medium, making little distinction between scientific and artistic approaches. He was most enthusiastic about August Sander's portrait-catalogue of German society, *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of our time), the first of his volumes in the "Man in the Twentieth Century" series: "This is one of the futures of photography foretold by Atget. It is a photographic editing of society, a clinical process; even enough of a cultural necessity to make one wonder why other so-called advanced countries of the world have not also been examined and recorded."⁷¹ In other ways too there was a congruity between Evans and Stryker, for in each case small-town and rural America represented values they wanted to preserve. Stryker would construct shooting scripts for his photographers in the field that would convey the direction of his curiosity and the slant of his imagination: "Bill posters; sign painters—crowd watching a window sign being painted; sky writing; paper in park after concert; pa-

Rothstein argues it's still real.
What is it?
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rade watching, ticker tape, sitting on curb."⁷² Evans's pictures of such places would stir Stryker's sense of nostalgia for an America that was "safer and more peaceful," "before radio and television."⁷³

Moreover, both Stryker and Evans aimed at creating what in effect was a response to the Van Wyck Brooks challenge of the teens—to create a cultural expression that would bridge the highbrow and low-brow elements of the society, that would synthesize the best elements of the intellectual tradition and the best elements of the practical tradition, and fuse them in an art that would represent the energies of twentieth-century America. And both were at bottom constructing an elaborate response to the values of an economy built on social division and slick advertising, a response made up out of the visual evidence of popular culture.

But despite the shared vision uniting the director and his star photographer, there were also irreconcilable differences that would make Evans's tenure at the FSA a short one. For one, the purpose of the FSA photography unit was at bottom propagandistic, while Evans's goal was to create, with the camera, "pure record not propaganda." He was thus at odds with the constraints of government work—the need to "make photographic statements for the government or do photographic chores for gov or anyone in gov"; the need to turn over his negatives to the government office for printing; the need to compromise his pure aesthetic goals with the collective and practical demands of a Washington bureaucracy.⁷⁴ And where Stryker prided himself on the FSA photographs being positive in tone ("there is no picture in there that in any way whatsoever represents an attempt by a photographer to ridicule his subject, to be cute with him, to violate his privacy"),⁷⁵ Evans took a more aloof, ironic, witty stance toward his subjects, as suggested by some notes he made in a 1934 letter regarding a project to photograph the "typical" American city: "Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful stuff, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay."⁷⁶ Evans had studied America through the satiric slant of E. E. Cummings and T. S. Eliot; he had fashioned his artistic persona on the irony and aloofness of Baudelaire, the objectivity and coldness of Flaubert. Put simply, Stryker's *sentimentality* was anathema to Evans, along with the inevitable tendency toward melodrama that was part of FSA sensibility. Whatever else we may say about the two most famous FSA

a fusion of
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to represent
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Evans:
Modernist
(Baudelaire)
ironic,
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shots—Lange's "Migrant Mother" and Rothstein's "Duststorm"—they came out of a sensibility that was alien to Evans.

In the afterword to his friend Evans's *American Photographs*, Lincoln Kirstein described the function of photography as Evans understood and practiced it: "The facts of our homes and times, shown surgically, without the intrusion of the poet's or painter's comment or necessary distortion, are the unique contemporary field of the photographer, whether in static print or moving film. It is for him to fix and to show the whole aspect of our society, the sober portrait of its stratifications, their backgrounds and embattled contrasts. It is the camera that today reveals our disasters and our claims to divinity, doing what painting and poetry used to do and, we can only hope, will do again."⁷⁷ What Paul Rosenfeld had done for Stieglitz, interpreting his symbolic role within the culture, naming his intellectual universe, Kirstein does for Evans in this essay. Only where Rosenfeld had made Stieglitz into a kind of lyric poet of modernism, expressing through the camera a special sensibility, Kirstein's Evans is more objective—a surgeon, a doctor of society, an analyst, a revealer of truths. Some years later, Evans himself defined the function of photography in similar terms, echoing Gustav Stickley and Louis Sullivan in their complaint against the abstractness of American education, seeing in the camera an instrument that could restore reality, as Mumford earlier had seen Stieglitz's function: "Our overwhelming formal education deals in words, mathematical figures, and methods of rational thought, not in images. This may be a form of conspiracy that promises artificial blindness. It certainly is that to a learning child. It is this very blindness that photography attacks, blindness that is ignorance of real seeing and is perversion of seeing. It is reality that photography reaches toward."⁷⁸ Evans's social role was to restore authenticity to the American vision.

What gives Evans's images the illusion of objectivity is the quality of direct confrontation, of a head-to-head meeting with his subjects that grants them the full respect of their own presence and character. And this is as true for his architectural studies as for his human portraits. With his large-frame, tripod camera, Evans captures in detail the grain of wood, the warping of planks, the textures of corrugated tin; his approach is to shoot head on, allowing the symmetry of the buildings and their fragile solidity to meet the viewer with full force. The portraits are even more striking, with the subjects looking usually

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right into the lens, their faces sober, guileless, dignified. Partly, our impression of Evans's objectivity is a function of his simply approaching his subjects frontally, framing them square: compare Dorothea Lange's usual approach, which takes the subject from an angle, creating a typically diagonal composition; or look at Ben Shahn, who often uses asymmetry and dramatic conflicts between foreground and background, with figures coming into the edges of the print, as if the photo continued on past the frame; or look at Margaret Bourke-White, whose favorite position was shooting up from the ground or down from on high, thus giving her subjects distorted, Mannerist figures. Evans, in this context, seems direct, unmanipulative, objective. Yet he was careful, in his later years, to call his approach a "documentary style" as opposed to the creation of "documents," and the qualification is important: "This style does seem honest. It isn't always so, but it seems so."⁷⁹ The recent argument that Evans actually moved furniture around in the houses he photographed in Alabama only confirms what he was already in principle admitting. Evans was aware of the degree to which he was manipulating his subjects, even when not appearing to do so; he was aware that the objectivity of the camera is a matter of degrees, of winning assent to a probable fiction.⁸⁰ *Very well put.*

Evans had worked his way toward the objective approach of the 1930s through an apprenticeship in modernism (in the late 1920s) which included skyscraper abstractions in the precisionist style of early Strand and Sheeler, industrial abstractions that recall A. L. Coburn's Vorticist phase, and aerial views modeled on the European modernists.⁸¹ These experiments in eccentric angles and distorted vision gave way in the early 1930s to what would become the characteristic symmetry and rectangular approach of his documentary style. But in certain of Evans's early photographs one can discern a more idiosyncratic interest in materials that would ultimately become the core of his work: candid snapshots of people on the street in New York and at Coney Island, storefronts, close-ups of neon signs in New York City, Victorian architecture in small towns, and itinerant street photographers at work in city streets. Here are the beginnings of Evans the social historian, the photographer as recorder of everyday society, of vernacular culture.

Evans located his own particular viewpoint on American society by taking a position as ironic spectator, an American Atget, staring di-

How do we
reconcile this
"documentary
style" to
the irony
described in
the previous
pages?



*Walker Evans, Window Display, Bethlehem, Pa., 1935
(Courtesy of Library of Congress)*

rectly at the popular culture of the American twentieth century. Against the glossy advertising world of glittering consumer products, of an all-powerful technology with immense powers of mass production, against the world created by a Bourke-White or a Steichen (of the latter, Evans wrote, "his general note is money, understanding of advertising values, special feeling for parvenu elegance, slick technique"),⁸² Evans recorded the antiworld of folk commerce—country stores stocked with general goods, pawnshops, roadside tire stores, street vendors. Against the modernist elevation of the beautiful technological artifact into an icon of abstract perfection, Evans showed us the humble object in its natural surroundings—towels worn thin with use, a broom angled against a wall; chairs, bowls, silverware—yet objects that had a certain dignity in the simplicity of their shape and their adaptation to human need. Against the towering skyscraper and the latest streamlined engineering marvel, Evans offered the intricacies of Victorian Gothic houses, or the simple rows of workers' cottages in industrial towns, or the lone shack in the rural South, or the disheveled elegance of a run-down Southern plantation.

Evans stepped outside the world of advertising by recording advertisements themselves, in situ, as they appear surrounding our lives—as signs in the street; as hand-painted barn decorations; as commercial signs hanging outside country stores; as theatrical and minstrel posters, half torn, posted on brick walls; as movie billboards, advertising the glamour of Hollywood in working-class neighborhoods; as magazine advertisements, cut out to serve as wall decorations; as stand-up store displays, used as cardboard insulation for unheated shacks. Street advertisements had appeared as the subject of photographs as early as the teens in some of Paul Strand's cityscapes and, treated as elements in an abstract composition, in Paul Outerbridge's "42nd Street El" (1925).⁸³ In a somewhat more self-conscious affirmation of the aesthetic worth of popular culture, invoking the spirit of Whitman, Robert Coady's little magazine, *The Soil*, had published a two-page photographic spread featuring the mannequin-filled windows of the Monroe Clothes Shop on Broadway.⁸⁴ Evans, who had reacted against the romantic mysticism and aestheticism of Stieglitz, might be seen as picking up where Coady and *The Soil* had left off. But Evans was adding to the American Dadaism of Coady a sense of irony and pathos that had been unimagined earlier—a sense of the deeper juxtapositions of modern American life, the contrasts between

Is this
Orwell
defining the
irony?



Walker Evans, *A Miner's Home, Vicinity Morgantown, West Virginia, 1935*
 (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

glamour and poverty, between advertised life and real life, a sense of how people live within a world of signs and symbols. NBS

Evans's consciousness of visual signs extended, not surprisingly, to the photograph itself as a ubiquitous presence in society, and a leit-motif throughout his work of the 1930s is the role of the professional maker of pictures—the itinerant street photographer, the small-town commercial studio. A major theme of *American Photographs*, as Alan Trachtenberg has shown, is the process of photography as a making-over into images or pictures, a process that has its echoes and re-duplications in other images of graphic representation throughout the volume.⁸⁵

Evans's own portraits are deliberately different from the typical studio or commercial or passport photograph that he liked to subsume within his own photographic world. They are different in two

quite opposite ways: on the one hand, Evans liked to position his subjects close to the camera lens, inviting them to stare directly at the machine before them in a way that often produced startlingly direct, serious, somewhat vulnerable images. One feels the subject has let down his guard, not knowing whether to trust or mistrust the camera. (Despite the often wildly different social status of his subjects, Evans's portraits often have a uniform quality.) The result is a portrait that is quite different from the typical smiling face or otherwise theatricalized portrait: Evans captures an almost existential confrontation with the Camera as Other, a moment when, one feels, his subjects are looking into themselves as well as into a lens. Yet on the other hand, Evans recorded faces that were totally *unaware* of the camera's presence, in an effort to achieve an utterly natural, unguarded expression, an authentic bit of life lifted from the stream of everyday social interaction. Evans had been fascinated by Strand's experiments in the teens with a fake lens on the front of his camera, allowing him to shoot from the side, and up close, at persons on the street who were unaware of being photographed ("Blind Woman" [1916], was a favorite). Evans updated Strand's unobtrusive recording of society by fitting himself with a hidden camera and riding the subway in the late 1930s, photographing every rider who sat opposite him.⁸⁶

As Stieglitz was the representative photographer of the early decades of the twentieth century, so Evans was the representative image-maker of the 1930s. And as Stieglitz had been celebrated earlier as the Romantic Whitman, who had used the camera as a tool for embracing twentieth-century America, Evans may be seen as the Ironic Whitman, both in and out of the game, aloof, cold at times, detached, working against the grain, against the commercial values that had come to dominate the twentieth century. Evans was not the celebrator of American optimism, he was the pessimist. Like Whitman he was an omnivorous collector of images, an accumulator of particulars, with a particular affection for the meanest of things. But Evans was colder than Whitman, colder than Stieglitz. If Stieglitz had made the camera a part of himself, turning it into an extension of the body, Evans had worked the opposite magic, making himself into a part of the camera, developing an eye that was more purely photographic than any other of his time, more purely attuned to the incongruities visible through the camera's lens. Evans saw with the eye of a camera, and with more than a little of its clinical detachment.

Using the machine in the full range of its capacities, from the large and obtrusive view camera to the unobtrusive, hidden 35 mm, Evans recorded an America in which the machine had largely transformed social life. As Kirstein put it, "The eye of Evans is open to the visible effects, direct and indirect, of the industrial revolution in America, the replacement by the machine in all its complexities of the work and art once done by individual hands and hearts, the exploitation of men by machinery and machinery by men."⁸⁷ Strand's hope that the camera could serve as a model for man's mastery of the machine would seem, from the standpoint of Evans's 1950s, to have been a pipe dream; Evans was under no such illusions. He took his position outside the mainstream of commercial society, outside even the benevolent purposes of the FSA. His commitment was to a way of seeing that was honest and anti-authoritarian, that embodied, above all, a kind of authenticity grounded in the independence of the photographer's eye. The irony is that although Evans had defined himself against Stieglitz (the latter "was artistic and romantic. It gave me an aesthetic to sharpen my own against—a counteraesthetic"),⁸⁸ Evans shared with the older photographer a personal quality of independence (if not orneriness) that must have found in the camera a perfect instrument for the observing eye—an instrument with a capacity for objective treatment of the visible world.

Mediating between the world and the brain, the camera during the years between the wars was a powerful instrument of revelation, changing our sense of the world by its power to shock the sensibilities or move the viewer emotionally; restoring our sense of touch by stripping the eye of its encrusted conventions, its visual habits, its mental habits. As such, it was in harmony with the authenticity of structure and materials that was basic to the rhetoric of architecture and design in the early twentieth century; and as such it was a prime symbol for a way of seeing, and imagining, that the writer too was seeking in the first half of the twentieth century.