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# Picturing the Depression: Ambivalent Politics of Representation in FSA Photography

Michael Rööslü

The genre of photojournalism is situated at a crucial intersection of the Modernist landscape. It took not only technical innovations to capture and distribute photographic images quickly and cheaply among a growing readership of newspapers and magazines: photography as a new medium of communication also required an entirely new paradigm of reading. One of the most rewarding places to look at the development of this conventional apparatus is the Farm Security Administration or FSA, which created an extensive archive of journalistic pictures, and at the same time produced some of the most famous American photographers of the Depression period. The work of Walker Evans – especially the portfolio for his and James Agee’s book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) – is of particular interest here, because it adopts the strategy of systematically disrupting the generic rules that encompass the field-work of FSA photographers. Evans thereby presents the implicit traits of the genre to the viewer’s awareness, and at the same time renegotiates several of its problematic implications. In short, his work functions as an indicator of both a new paradigm of reading photographic texts and the need to uproot the same paradigm as a prerequisite to achieve political change.

During the Great Depression, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) produced a considerable corpus of photographic documentary material from all over the United States. This project is situated in a period when new reproduction techniques enabled the mass circulation of photographs, and when these documents needed to acquire a conventional apparatus in order to become readable, and so to serve the purpose of

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communication. Various FSA photographers forged new reading conventions through their work, and thereby invested the medium not only with the power to convey specific information, but also with political leverage. The resulting images were both appealing and accessible to a large and heterogeneous readership.

This new mode of conveying meaning and information to readers across the country was attacked by Walker Evans, himself a photographer for the FSA. Indeed, Evans' work systematically confronts, negates and short-circuits the hidden assumptions emerging from FSA documentary photography (produced by people like Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, for instance). His work thus renders the emerging visual paradigm graspable by confronting it with a counter-discourse. In the following essay, particular attention will be paid to Evans' photo portfolio for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which he researched together with the writer, journalist and film critic James Agee in 1936 and published five years later. The juxtaposition of a new visual practice with Evans' immediate attack on it helps to outline the stakes, power and extent of paradigmatic changes in the visual culture of the 1930s, many of which have remained operative to the present day.

At the outset, the field of this investigation has to be briefly outlined. The setting is the 1930s, in a United States that was in the throes of the Great Depression. Roosevelt's "New Deal" united various programmes to alleviate unemployment, reform the financial system, and re-boost the economy. One of these programmes was the FSA, founded in 1935, and initially called the "Resettlement Administration." Although the FSA was dedicated to more direct modes of intervention, photography was a major component of the institution, and its information division archived and provided photographic and textual material for the press in an attempt to draw public attention to the difficult predicament of various segments of society. In short, FSA photography is to be seen as a crucial political tool. It isolates specific problems, renders them accessible and analysable, and thus establishes a basis for action.

The means to deploy this power was the emerging genre of photojournalism. For technical reasons, photographic images could not be reproduced on a large scale before the 1930s. Though halftone reproductions were a possible solution, most newspapers and magazines continued to use the cheaper medium of engravings up to the late 1920s. This is when photography caught up with the needs of news transmission, through smaller and portable cameras (like the 35 mm Leica in 1925), and the technique of the wirephoto. These innovations have marked the Great Depression as what is often called the "Golden Age" of photojournalism.

The entry of photography into the mass media necessitated a new conventional apparatus for reading journalistic pictures. A large interpretive community, to borrow the term Stanley Fish coined in “Interpreting the *Variorum*” (1973-1975), has to agree on a number of implicit conventions for reading, including the ontological relation between the photographic image and the event depicted. Once established and authorised by consensus, these conventions can be harnessed to the task of communication. Ideally, this process is symmetrical: the exchanged information – coded by the journalist and decoded by the reader of a newspaper – should be as unambiguous as possible. Arthur Rothstein’s photograph *Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* (1936) is an example of such eloquent photography. It shows a father and his two sons fighting against the power of the wind as they struggle to make their way across bare and dried-up ground toward a run-down cabin. With an affective impact that statistics in a written report could hardly provoke, this picture outlines a number of links between meteorological conditions, the infertile ground of the Dust Bowl, the resulting economic devastation and precarious living conditions. All this is enhanced by the image of the family, and the absence of a female figure further prompts the viewer to extend their reading to a metaphorical level, where the missing mother evokes the lack of fertile ground.

In order to grant the coherence of such a reading paradigm, and therefore the readability of documentary photographs, the conventions at the service of a larger community have to be carefully maintained and circulated. Roy Stryker (the head of the documentary project of the FSA) is famous for the sociological briefings to which he subjected his photographers before specific assignments. He is also frequently discussed for his so-called “shooting scripts”, in which he offered very pragmatic guidelines to his collaborators. Consider the following extract from a letter addressed by Stryker to Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein on 19 February 1942. In the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor, Stryker was asking for:

[p]ictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S. Get people with a little spirit. Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person’s home and that just about everyone is too old to work and too malnourished to care much what happens. . . . More contented-looking old couples – woman sewing, man reading (*sic*).

(Tagg, “The Currency of the Photograph” 170)

This extract exemplifies the ideological issues that are at stake in such shooting scripts. Furthermore, the consensus aimed at by Stryker appears to be anchored in stereotypical roles for specific categories of

people, such as men, women or the elderly. Such *clichés* figure here as ready-made codes that stabilise an emerging *fundus* of reading conventions by anchoring them in familiar ground. Stryker's sociological briefings and shooting scripts may not have been strongly prescriptive, but they clearly outlined what was deemed appropriate information for certain kinds of issues, and how they could be adequately represented.

These briefings inevitably had an impact on the scenes that photographers encountered in the field. Take Dorothea Lange's famous photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936), for instance. This image has become a seminal icon of the Great Depression, which indicates that it involves or isolates conventions central to the exegesis of this historical period. In an article entitled "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: Migrant Mother" for *Popular Photography*, Lange remembers her encounter with Florence Thompson, the woman in the photograph, as follows: "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet," and she continues: "I did not ask her name or her history" (qtd. in Curtis 42-3). Indeed, the prior briefings seem to structure a way of paying attention to certain kinds of potential photographic subjects, rather than to encourage an exploration of an event or situation itself.

This preparation of the collaborators of the FSA information division shaped as well as maintained a conventional apparatus for reading visual and composite texts. However, the system thus enforced was a democratic one, which by definition needs to be open to critique, unlike the fascist and Soviet models of the same period. This critical potential is precisely what *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* set out to realise. This work of photojournalism by James Agee and Walker Evans outlines the problems and precarious living conditions of three tenant cotton farmer families from Alabama, with whom the two journalists stayed for over three weeks during the summer of 1936. Initially, their work was intended for an article commissioned by *Fortune* magazine for their documentary series "Life and Circumstances" (Stott 261). It was Agee who chose Evans for the assignment that would be published only five years later and in the form of an autonomous book. As William Stott points out, "The FSA loaned Evans to Time Inc. on condition that the work he did became government property" (261). In other words, while traveling to Alabama on a *Fortune* assignment, Evans was still officiating as an FSA photographer. The present investigation, in this essay, is limited to Evans' pictures in the original publication of the book in 1941, since the photographs he added in the editions of 1960 and later extend their readings in various directions. The discussion that follows will show that Evans' portfolio outlines a critique of the rules the FSA loosely prescribed for photojournalistic practice, and at the same time proposes an alternative reading apparatus from within the FSA, drawing on the very

conventions authorised by this institution. This counter-discourse to prevalent photojournalistic rules will be examined through four traits of the genre that Evans' portfolio both crystallises and opens up for modification.

### *The Photograph as a Window on to the World/Event*

It is usually assumed that a twofold authority is at work in a news photograph: first, there is a causal link between the photographic image and what it "captures," and second, the act of taking a picture implies the presence of an eye-witness in the form of the journalist, who provides the guarantee for the truthfulness of the photograph's message. This twofold authority, however, is defamiliarised by Evans' portfolio through a complete lack of paratext. The reader opens *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the 31 photographs that precede Agee's writing. No textual elements whatsoever accompany these pictures: there is no title page, no caption, page number, introduction or preface. This strange opening violates the capacity of the photojournalistic genre to inscribe its object within "the real world." Without such paratextual structures – especially captions – and without dates or the names of the people and places depicted, the images refuse to be anchored within a specified and recognisable setting in the world outside the book. The first part of the portfolio consists of one single image, the portrait of the landlord to the Burroughs. The three middle sections each present one of the three tenant families (the Burroughs, the Fields and the Tengles), together with their homes. The last part contains photographs of a nearby small town. The portfolio thus constitutes its content through a strategy of *difference*: the three families emerge next to each other, and their homes on the fields are juxtaposed with the town. They are linked and contrasted by the reader, rather than anchored in a specific spatio-temporal reference point. The resulting meaning is overtly marked as a construction by the beholder, and the photographic medium no longer seems to constitute a window on to an inherently meaningful world.

### *Generalisation*

The second characteristic of photojournalism that is dissected and transformed by Evans' portfolio might be termed the need for generalisation. While the specificities of each individual farmer and his or her predicament are crucial evidence, they are useful only insofar that they permit the photographer to outline the problems of Southern tenant



farmers in general. A report is expected to “portray” their situation, so that political measures can be taken to help them.

Roughly two thirds of Evans’ original 1941 portfolio consist of individual- or group portraits, a genre that epitomises these radically opposed possibilities of specification and generalisation: on the one hand, a portrait isolates a person or group of people and presents them in their iconic uniqueness. On the other hand, it may inscribe its subject within more general categories. A bookshelf as the backdrop of a photographed interviewee will signify his or her erudite “background,” and the specificity of a face can be suppressed entirely in favour of a symbolic reading, as in the picture of an Italian chef on a packet of pasta.

Like most portraits in Evans’ portfolio, that of *Floyd Burroughs* frames its subject very closely.<sup>1</sup> Although his torn (but clean and consciously arranged) clothes, his piercing glance and rather stylish position open up a space for potential meaning, no objects external to his body allow the reader to embed him in a more general context. Burroughs’ conspicuous posing for the picture and the complete lack of suggestive “props” or working activities render generalisation difficult. Compare his portrait, for instance, with that which Margaret Bourke-White published in *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), and which is entitled *Hamilton, Alabama – “We Manage to Get Along”* (n.p.). It depicts a woman working in the field using an indistinguishable tool or machine. The specificity of her face is obscured by the shadow of her bonnet, which protects her from the searing sun. The centre of the image shows her breasts and foreshortened hands, which may have shocked the Northern readership through the association of female gender with hard manual labour. Significantly, the closely cropped image does not show what machine or tool she is using; she therefore does not appear as a woman ploughing a field, for instance, but more generally as a woman working hard. In stark contrast to this example, the viewer of all the openly posed portraits in Evans’ portfolio does not see what the tenants do or who they are through generalisation. The beholder’s expectations are thus frustrated and turn from the anticipated message “poverty in the rural South” to the journalistically irrelevant “meet the Burroughs.”

This refusal of the possibility of generalisation is further enhanced in Evans’ pictures by the specific selection of camera angles on the people portrayed. Bourke-White uses an extremely low angle in her above-mentioned picture. Such low angles render the person depicted as full of dignity, strength, or superiority; this technique was extensively exploited

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the shortened titles of Evans’ photographs will be used. The full titles are listed with the references below, together with a direct link to their digitised copies in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue.

later in Nazi propaganda and in Soviet Social Realism. Depicting the working woman against the sky, the photograph produces an apotheotic glorification of the poor but anonymous worker. She is not a woman, but a representation of labour or poverty itself. Alternatively, portraits in similar journalistic works frequently used high angles, looking down upon their objects of investigation in order to express their status as victims. Evans' portraits of the tenants are generally taken from eye-level, and thus individualise them to the point of disturbing the beholder. These are neither victims nor heroes, but merely people like the reader, positioned on the same "level" in the scopic configuration.

### *Voyeurism and Glorification*

The glorification and victimisation of the tenants is also closely connected to the third issue to be briefly addressed here. For the popular press, tenant farmers in the rural South constituted an exotic and unexpected Other to be consumed by a Northern readership. The reader of such documents is struck by the tenants' difference in class and lifestyle, a realisation that may inspire pity but at the same time confirms the reader's appreciation of his or her own position. Kevin Rozario elaborates on this voyeuristic potential in the context of *American Red Cross Magazine* in his article "Delicious Horrors" (2003). He argues that humanitarian institutions never could do without the pleasure of cruelty, and investigates how philanthropy became a marketing venture and mass phenomenon precisely at the moment (the period in which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* originated) when donors began to be courted as consumers who had to be entertained (Rozario 419). He emphasises in particular the double sense of the word *appealing* as either "to call upon" (for help) or "to give pleasure" (422-3). The repression of the pleasure induced by scrutinising photographs of the poor, however, may lead to a pity that does not arise from empathy so much as operate as a form of compensation. The socio-hierarchical "lowness" of the category of the poor can be rechannelled into admiration for the strength of its members in the face of hardship. Evans' portfolio short-circuits the voyeuristic dimension of its genre in at least three ways.

First, and as already mentioned above, the portraits isolate the tenants from the specific context or sight of their suffering. Also, they are shown in a publicly visible setting (usually outside, in front of the boarded walls of their homes), as if glimpsed by a pedestrian walking by. The pictures do not pry into the private sphere of the tenants. And finally, most of the people portrayed look straight at the camera, whereas voyeuristic pleasure presupposes a hidden or transparent viewer.



The second point is based on the interior shots of the three houses. The tenants' living space (a potential site for voyeuristic consumption) indeed appears in several pictures, but just as the tenants' homes and work were absent from the portraits, the houses are devoid of their inhabitants (with the exception of the Fields' group picture on the bed, which will be addressed below). The people who attribute connotations of property and functionality to the depicted objects and furniture are completely missing. The qualities of sparseness and simplicity are omnipresent in the interior shots of the portfolio; the spaces the photographs depict are extremely clean, orderly, neat, and the choice of photographic parameters gives an impression of symmetry and masterful composition. There is nothing candid about these images. They look like illustrations in a prospectus for an open-air museum: the viewer's attention is drawn towards their formal aesthetic, which isolates these pictures from their surroundings within a sealed and self-sufficient frame. The *Washstand in the Dog Run and Kitchen of Floyd Burroughs' Cabin* is a representative example for this technique.

A final strategy by which the portfolio short-circuits the voyeuristic drive was discerned by Peter Cosgrove in his essay "Snapshots of the Absolute" (1995). Cosgrove looks at two different discourses of family that Evans' photographs deploy in the portfolio. One arises from the section on the Fields family, with the following three consecutive images: (1) *Bud Fields* alone sitting on his bed, (2) *Bud Fields with His Second Wife* and their baby daughter on the same bed, and (3) *Sharecropper Bud Fields and His Family* all gathered on the bed, including three children, the parents and grandmother (this sequence only appears in the original 1941 version). The second instance is entitled *Part of the Bedroom of Floyd Burroughs' Cabin*, a picture that also shows a parental bed, but with clean, white, neatly arranged and untouched sheets. Cosgrove argues that these respective beds present and juxtapose two stereotypical middle-class beliefs about poverty of the 1930s and 40s: on the one hand the quasi-animalistic and restless fertility of the poor, and on the other their nobility and strength in the face of hardship. The sequence of three photographs has the Fields family grow – or almost explode – on the bed in which all their offspring were conceived, while the Burroughs' bed remains orderly and distant like all the remaining interior shots. This contrasts the pictures of the Fields' bed with the moral impeccability of the romanticised poor. These two modes of consuming the tenants (as animals or heroes) are thus brought into opposition; they force each other on the reader's awareness, and cancel each other out as equally inappropriate. In short, the three examples of the portraits, interior shots, and discourses of family illustrate how *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* system-

atically disrupts the voyeuristic potential inherent in a journalistic approach to the three families.

### *Self-Awareness*

One might argue that Evans' photographs also briefly address the issue of mediation itself. The tenants portrayed facing the camera not only defy voyeurism, but also draw attention to the position of the photographer, who is always implied in these pictorial texts by the conspicuously contrived posing of the tenants. Indeed, one often wonders whether these shots have been staged by Evans or rather by the tenants themselves. One picture in the portfolio, entitled *Family Snapshots on Wall of Room in Frank Tenge's Home*, assumes a rather peculiar role in this respect. It shows two photographs pinned next to each other on a wooden board wall. The left one shows an elderly woman in front of a field, the right one depicts three children sitting on the grass in front of thick shrubbery. The two pictures almost seem to provide Evans with the aesthetic and compositional guidelines for his own portraits: they equally show people facing the camera, framed closely, and with their eyes on the level of the objective, as if Evans' pictures were based on the families' own representational conventions. However, the *mise-en-abyme* could also be read as assigning an unexpected position to the reader: if the viewer sees Evans' photographs as the Tengles see their own family members in the two pictures on their wall, then the tenants are placed in the position of the *reader's* family in this particular scopic setup. The portfolio clearly guides the beholder away from objectifying the tenants. This is further emphasised by the picture labelled *Cotton Room* which shows a note written on cardboard over the Tengles' fireplace. The note reads: "PLEASE BE QUITE – Every body is Welcome" (*sic*). Similar to the ethical discourse carried by the *mise-en-abyme*, this image, instead of accusing the photographer of intruding into a private sphere, seems to officially invite him in.

### *Conclusion*

Evans' portfolio defines photojournalism in a negative way: its anchorage of the text in the "outside world" has been emphasised by short-circuiting the erroneous assumptions that this same world is inherently meaningful, transparently mediated by the journalist, and passively consumed by the viewer. Similarly, the genre's tendency to objectify the tenants emerged from a shift in the portraits from the expected general-

ising mode to an individuating one. The specific functions and modalities of the usually self-effacing genre are thus forcefully brought to the reader's attention. Moreover, what the portfolio reifies as the "problem" is the conventional apparatus itself, rather than the tenants.

However, that does not mean that the pragmatic potential within photojournalism has been sacrificed to self-reflexivity here – after all, if journalism resulted in family albums, it would indeed lose all its political power. Instead, the portfolio proposes several concrete alternatives for transforming the more problematic conventions of its genre. It has become apparent in the above discussion that, in the portfolio, the repressed aesthetic appreciation that results in voyeuristic pleasure is channelled into the open by the overly marked composition of the interior shots, and the pitying or romanticisation of poverty are counteracted by the choice of camera angle. The tenants are constructed as subjects, rather than consumable objects. In short, the foregrounding of photojournalistic conventions renders these norms malleable and open to concrete change.

To conclude, Evans' photographs crystallise and modify a genre that plays a significant role in its surrounding political landscape. By doing so, they emphasise two crucial points: first, a palpable and long-term change can only occur on the level of the interpretive community. Second, the trigger for change does not necessarily have to be sought outside the system that is put into question. Indeed, Evans' portfolio has such a powerful effect precisely because it does not simply propose an alternative framework. Just as Evans transgresses the representational "rules" of FSA photography while being on the pay roll of the same institution, his attack on photojournalism operates both *on* and *through* the genre's conventional apparatus, and draws its energy from the paradigm the latter has authorised and circulated itself.

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