

Documentary photography in the 1930s : Reflections on James Agee and Walker Evans' "Let us now praise famous men" and Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's "You have seen their faces"

by Hans Durrer



Left: Like this one, all photographs illustrating this article, are from the FSA project "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"

Imbuing fact with feeling. The term documentary was coined in the late 1920s by the British film maker John Grierson, and stands for the truthful depiction of reality while at the same time imbuing facts with feeling. It is "an approach that makes use of the artistic faculties to give vivification to facts" as Walt Whitman defined the place of poetry in the world. In the words of Walter Sussman: "... the whole idea of documentary — not with words alone but with sight and sound — makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other's experience."

Documentary, despite it sounding rather soulless, signifies the primacy of feeling over fact, and consists, essentially, of a deeply humanistic take on the real world, for, as Stott pointed out: "A document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal." Yet the purpose of documentary photography was to reach beyond the self, its intention was, as Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor explained, "to let the subjects, the living participants of a social reality, speak to you face to face. Having looked at a documentary book, you could no longer be ignorant of them. You had seen their faces."

In 1929, the stock market crashed, and in the 1930s the Great Depression held America in its grip. Unemployment in 1933 approached 48 million, skilled and unskilled workers were affected, and no group was exempt from wage reductions. Persistent drought and misuse of land forced families to migrate from the heartland to the west in search for jobs and arable land. One of the projects that the Roosevelt government brought under way was the Resettlement Administration, a division of the Department of Agriculture. Its goal was "to revitalize a number of existing farm relief and housing operations," and to alleviate suffering "by providing resettlement loans to farmers and work programs for the urban unemployed."

The FSA project. The Historic Section of the Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration (FSA), started the most ambitious photographic project of that period — and one of the most ambitious of all time. As Rosenblum explains: "The project represented the New Deal's understanding that a visual documentation of conditions of work and life faced by farmers who suffered the calamities of drought and economic depression, and were in the process of being driven permanently from the land, was required to justify Federal expenditures for relief projects. Eventually in response to Congressional displeasure at the depiction of unrelieved poverty, photographers were directed to portray more positive aspects of the national experience."

In 1936, Fortune magazine decided to send its reporter James Agee to the South to portray a white tenant farmer and his family. This was exactly the kind of work that got Agee excited. He had been on the brink of resigning from the magazine because he "was growing bored with his assignments on such lifeless topics as glass, jewelry and Colonial Williamsburg," yet this assignment made him postpone leaving. He had only one request, he wanted the FSA photographer Walker Evans to accompany him to take the pictures.



The task the FSA photographers were confronted with was not only to document agrarian distress, for behind it lay the "... larger issues of meaning and identity. Moreover, they were being asked to consider and to portray people, especially in the South, who had already been effectively typecast as hopeless cases," writes Jeffrey. In the words of Greil Marcus: "In some ways they — the tenant farmers — lived like peasants on latifundios in El Salvador today; in almost every way they did not live in the United States as, even during the Depression, it was commonly understood. Living at the very margins of the economy, they were all but outside of history."



Hale County, Alabama. When Agee and Evans — respectively 27, and 33 years old — finally set out for the South, they did so with the best of intentions. Theirs would be a gentle approach, any exploitation was to be avoided. Both were strong individualists, and they did not intend to turn their assignment into a propaganda mission. Unsurprisingly, the start proved to be difficult — "... the rural southerners they met regarded the two journalists from New York with suspicion." Eventually, in Hale County, Alabama, after searching for more than a month, they won the hearts of three tenant families who grew cotton, the Burroughses, the Tingles, and the Fieldses — who became known as the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woods.

Needless to say, it is a daring and highly problematic undertaking to spend so much time with, and around, people who are down and out with the eventual purpose of using them, albeit with good intentions. As Agee put it: "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry

intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money (and in politics, for votes, job patronage, abelincolnism), and that these people could be capable of meditating this prospect without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an "honest" piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous approval."

Let us now praise famous men. What emerged from this challenge was not the magazine article accompanied by photographs they originally were assigned to do but a volume of five hundred pages. It goes without saying that their editors at *Fortune* were not enchanted — this was a text at least ten times longer as they had wanted. Yet above all: in no respect did this work fit the categories in demand at the time. "In brief, it was ... too long, too personal, and too violent," as Stott phrased it.

In any case: delivering a five hundred page piece to a magazine is asking for trouble and it does not seem unlikely that this was exactly what Agee had been up to. It was an enthralling and, at the same time, arduous text, not fitting any category — a "combination of poetic mediation and plain reportage on everyday life, of weather and landscape and eruptions of love and bitterness," Marcus writes — it is the kind of book publishers prefer to not lay hands on. That it finally came out was due to Eunice Jessup, a friend of Agee and editor at Houghton Mifflin, who strongly recommended and, subsequently — the book sold not more than 300 copies [1] — lost her job over it.



The book was finally published in September 1941. By then Europe had fallen and the Battle of Britain entered the terrible months of the Blitz — the time for launching such a book could hardly have been worse. Moreover, everything that could be said by that time about tenancy seemed to have already been said, and, last but not least, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was not at all the kind of book that would give itself easily to the readers. And as far as Agee was concerned, it did not want to: "Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and it is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas."

It is ironic that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has come to be seen as characterising America in the 1930s, for its unfortunate publishing history alone illustrates clearly that it was not at all perceived to be an expression of the times — the then bestseller was *You Have Seen Their Faces*, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of tenant farming as it was called.

You Have Seen Their Faces appeared in November 1937 when the sharecroppers were a prominent topic. Caldwell's text expressed what the sociologists, government officials and journalists had been saying all along: that no plan so far was sufficient, that re-education and supervision was needed, and that mono-crop agriculture was disastrous. It was an acceptable, liberal, and conventional text — the kind most editors like. Yet it most probably would not have sold so well would it have not been for the photos of Bourke-White. She showed people that were "bare, defenseless before the camera and its stunning flash. No dignity seems left them: we see their meager fly-infested meals, their soiled linen; we see them spotted in the raptures of a revival meeting, a woman's arms frozen absurdly in the air; we see a preacher taken in peroration, his mouth and nostrils open like a hyena's," writes Stott.

Her pictures were spectacular, and the ironic captions made them stand out even more. A sharecropper, for instance, with a furrowed face and watering eyes was made to say: "A man learns not to expect much after he's farmed cotton all his life." Although the authors had made it clear that the captions were not intended to reflect the sentiments of the people portrayed but were a reflection of their own view, one cannot but feel taken aback by the condescension and arrogance displayed. Nevertheless, *You have seen their faces* was "inventive" and "unprecedented in the scale of its pictures and its many layered relations between the pictures and the text," writes the critic Alan Trachtenberg. Text and words were given equal prominence — an approach that is, unfortunately, still not very common.



You have seen their faces. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was of an entirely different spirit — it invented documentary. Evans and Agee had attempted to capture reality as it unfolded in front of their eyes. They wanted to record their experience of this world, and they did so obsessively — Agee documented his reaction to, literally, everything — yet with respect for the people they portrayed. This implied that "the reality treated is in no way tampered with. Nothing is imposed on experience," as Stott elaborates. There is no arranging in the way Evans went about his photographing; it is about being there, and being open for the moment that Agee described as "... all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is. This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time."

To perceive the things as they are, this is what Agee calls for. It is also what Dorothea Lange argues for: "That frame of mind that you need to make a very fine picture of a very wonderful thing, is different from the frame of mind of being on the pavement, jostled and pushed and circulating and rubbing against people with no identity. You cannot do it by not being lost yourself."

Margaret Bourke-White, on the other hand, practised the art of stealing pictures — "seldom," she writes — and rearranging scenes her way, despite saying that "the love of truth ... is requisite No.1 for a photographer." She looks for the spectacular, the extraordinary, the drama — what editors usually are asking for, then and now. "She was after the most extreme signs of poverty and degradation she could find," so the Evans biographer Rathbone. The contrast to Evans' approach could hardly have been greater. In the words of Stott: "Evans does not expose the reality he treats, he reveals it — or better, he lets it reveal itself. He does not seek out, he in fact avoids the spectacular, the odd, the piteous, the unseemly. Bud Woods' skin cancer, the Rickettses' "stinking beds," the horde of flies on the tenants' food and on their children's faces — these he does not show, though Bourke-White and Russell Lee showed them. He shows instead Bud Woods with a bandanna on his shoulder covering his sores, as one would naturally cover them from a stranger's eyes; he shows the Gudgers' neatly made bed; he shows an infant asleep beneath a flour sack to keep the flies off him. In short, he records people when they are most themselves, most in command, as they impose their will on the environment. He seeks normal human realities, but ones that have taken a form of such elegance that they speak beyond their immediate existence. These realities are the material of his art, which he calls "transcendent documentary photography": the making of images whose meanings surpass the local circumstances that provided their occasion."

The journalist's dilemma. Being around their farmer families for quite some time naturally created an intimacy that was difficult to escape. It is the journalist's dilemma that in order to get access to reliable information, they need the people to trust them, and that in order to make a living, they would have to exploit this trust. Evans and Agee knew that, eventually, they would betray their hosts. When they finally, after having extended their initially planned two weeks stay to three months, returned to New York, they "felt as much guilt as they had setting out." A few months later, Flora Bee Tingle wrote to Evans: "I sure was heart broken to see you leaving down hear. I was already heart broken but you Broken My Heart worsen."



There is no doubt: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *You Have Seen Their Faces* were instrumental in defining documentary. Alan Trachtenberg expressed his hope that we may come to see "these two imaginative works less as antagonists than as coinhabitants of the same historical and cultural space." Yet as much as these two were coinhabitants of the same time and space, they stood, and still stand, for totally antagonistic values — the self-reflective, and genuine trip of inquiry, concerned with the whole process of documenting (Agee and Evans), versus the cool professional arrogance mainly interested in the usability of the endeavour (Caldwell and Bourke-White).

Notes

1. Greil Marcus (1997) mentions "something over five hundred copies." In his introduction to the 1988 edition of *Let us now praise famous men* John Hersey writes: "In 1948 *Let us now praise famous men* fizzled out of print, having sold only 1,025 copies." The book was reissued in 1960 and, eventually, became a classic. Return to text

References

- * Agee, James, and Walker Evans (1988), *Let us now praise famous men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988.
- * Bourke-White, Margaret (1964), *Portrait of myself*. London: Collins.
- * Caldwell, Erskine, and Margaret Bourke-White (1995), *You have seen their faces*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- * Cox, Christopher (1987), "Preface." In: Dorothea Lange, Dorothea Lange. *The Aperture masters of photography series*, volume 5. New York: Aperture.
- * Jeffrey, Ian (1981), *Photography. A concise history*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- * Marcus, Greil (1997), *The dustbin of history*. London: Picador.
- * Rathbone, Belinda (1995), *Walker Evans. A biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- * Rosenblum, Naomi (1997), *World history of photography*. New York: Abbeville Press Newhall, 1997.
- * Stott, William (1986), *Documentary expression and thirties America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hans Durrer is the author of *Ways of Perception: On Visual and Intercultural Communication* (White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 2006). His website is hansdurrer.com, his blog: durrer-intercultural.blogspot.com.

This piece was originally published in "Studies in Photography"
www.icce.rug.nl/oqer-bin/contents/dossiers.cgi?09 © Hans Durrer and Soundscapes.