

**WALKER EVANS AND HIS 'DOCUMENTARY STYLE,'  
a personal reading.**

**by J. David Sapir**

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I come to this discussion of photography and Walker Evan's "documentary style" with a mixed background. For most of my life I have been a photographer -practicing photography sporadically. However I never thought to speak about photography, mine or anyone else's, in an academic or public context. "Show and be silent," might have been my motto. My profession as an anthropologist took me in decidedly non visual directions, descriptive linguistics, oral literature, and complex religious symbolism oaf non visual sort. A curious accident brought me to a discourse about photography.

One day in class, in a graduate course about writing grant proposals, I snarled, in fact shouted, at a student who spoke disparagingly oaf photo by Dorothea Lange. I would never, I assure you, have snarled in the least if student had made even the stupidest remark about an anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz or anyone. However, to disparage a photographer, one 'my' photographers, that was a different matter. One thing led to another and before I knew it I was teaching a lecture course on the history and culture of photography and a practical workshop on what I like to call ethnophotography.

In my early readings about photography I stumbled on two enigmatic phrases, made by photographers, that intrigued and puzzled me. The first was a remark of Man Ray's: Art is not photography. What Man Ray had in mind is anyone's guess. On reflection, however, one can give that remark a gloss that strikes at the core of photography, its indexicality. The other phrase was Walker Evan's self description as a photographer who used a documentary style. It is pertinent today to explore that characterization.

Arthur Danto, the philosopher of art, has said (or it is said that he said) that when you remove the subject from an art object, you are left with the style. We are here given an Aristotelian distinction between material and formal causes (what something is made of and the shape that that something takes -thing contained and container). The distinction is easily demonstrated with photography, because a subject is readily understood independently oaf photograph. A particular bell pepper is clearly understood apart from Edward Weston's photograph of that bell pepper. He made his photograph -the bell pepper placed in a rain culvert -he then ate the pepper in his salad. (what of his nudes?)

But what about documentary style? It sounds, following what Danto says, contradictory, an oxymoron. If the subject is the document, how can you have any style once the document is removed, given that the style is characterized as documentary?

My reading in preparation for this symposium led me to an essay by Max Kozloff a writer on photography (one of the more sensible ones)—which appeared in *Art in America* in 1980 (collected in his *The Privileged Eye*). The article reports the substance of a conference that took place in New Haven, Connecticut in 1979 (*The Voices in Photographic Criticism Symposium*, October, 1979). Kozloff noted the divided nature of the group where each member was intent on defending his or her particular critical turf. The lack of common voice disappointed Kozloff though he reported hearing "brief scraps of open-minded comment, and three talks in which common sense took sail." One of the talks "demonstrated that information and expression are inseparable in photographic statements." That talk was given by Howard Becker. I believe that the best way to come to a gloss on Walker's "documentary style" is to run with Becker's observation. For Walker Evans, surely, the style and the subject are one and inseparable.

Although Kozloff singled out Becker and a couple of others for praise, he devoted much of his report to those who in one way or another denied, in contrast to Becker, the factualness of photographs ... Joel Synder saying that "Carlyle was there for Mrs. Cameron - where else would he be?---but her metaphors were the only things that counted." For me, the comments by Erving Goffman, who was there to comment on Becker, are most interesting. Goffman, an uncanny observer of public interaction, took a particularly hard line. To quote Kozloff's report:

The sociologist Erving Goffman outflanked all the other participants, not only in his use of technical language, but in the "hardness" of his criteria for accepting photographic knowledge. With his insistence that science is science and that we all tend to over-read photos, he retroactively stiffened what was already an ungenerous attitude toward image content.

Let me insert an antidote. Seven years before the New Haven conference I had a show at the University of Pennsylvania's University Museum of about 100 of my Jóola (Senegal, West Africa) photos. After the show was over the photos returned home to sit in my living room, where I strung out in a row, about 20 of them, each propped up on the ledge of 36" high wainscot. The photos were blind-mounted (without borders) on Styrofoam board. This followed the old tradition in photojournalism where one photo was said to run into the next.

Erving Goffman (the Goffman of the conference) and Joel Sherzer the ethnolinguist (now at the University of Texas), came to pick me up on the way to dinner. Seeing the photographs: Joel said, 'You have a lot of friends here.' Erving said, 'do you think that those pictures say anything about reality? Absolutely not...' I recall more the heat than the substance of his harangue. I did not wish to argue simply because I had never troubled myself to ask whether the photos 'represented reality' or not. The photos, in their ensemble, said, or rather illustrated or better yet pointed to a something, concerning my African friends, that I never thought to record in words. In fact, that I could scarcely conceive of describing in words. Perhaps the photos caught no more than a 'brightening glance.'

In truth, probably the jolt that brought on Erving's squawk was the mass of photographs walking around the room. I truly believe that Erving was unnerved by the unprotected, unenclosed, unframed, uncontrolled photographs that were simply there. In contrast, I had on the wall several Edward Weston's appropriately framed (Guadeloupe, the Cabbage Leaf and a sitting Charis Wilson nude.). After attacking my wandering Africans he turned to the Weston's, and with sly, but genuine, relief said, 'Ah, Art!'

Let me follow Goffman from my position, not as a photographer, but as anthropologist. Goffman is not about to include photographs as valid statements about the world. This inclination is shared to a certain extent by those coming from the side of the photograph's subject - by a social scientist or historian interested in using the photograph as evidence. But not completely.

To begin with one hears, today, quite as frequently as in the 70's, and coming from a social scientist as well as from an art critic of photography, that any photograph is entailed. A photograph cannot show reality, at best, all it can do is show a photographer's take on reality. This permits an art critic to dismiss any consideration of the reality value of the photograph. By the same measure it forces a social scientist, who wishes to salvage the real, into a quandary.

To accept a photograph as evidence about the world one must first carry out certain operations upon it. One has to learn how to read a photograph. First and foremost the subject has to be divorced from its style, or more in the current discourse, the position of the photographer must be taken into account, with the position being identified as social, as political, as ideological, as well as aesthetic. The attention shifts away from the photograph onto the context of the photograph and of its creation. One finds in much of current writing that photographs often disappear into a matrix of historical and social analysis.

In the recent *Picturing Empire*, James Ryan devotes time discussing how John Thomson, the mid 19th century British photographer, represented the ideology of Empire in making his excursions into China. At no time in the discussion is the lasting representational 'value' of the photographs examined. What information might they offer about 19th century China? We do not learn, and apparently we are not expected to be curious. The same position is commonly taken when examining the photography of Native Americans. Anderson, Vroman, Dixon, Winter and Pond, the Gephard sisters, Curtis are all one and the same - exploiters of the Native American image.

If photographs are to provide evidence of the World they must be stripped of their style, denuded of aesthetic value. In reviewing the FSA file George Abbott White distinguishes between the "beautiful pictures" and the "vernacular pictures," indicating that it is in the latter that the broad information furnished by the file is to be found. The two types of photographs, of course, were taken by the same photographers, and by the looks of some of the examples given, the two types could very possibly come from the same roll of film. I suppose from the this "think dull" point of view the best photographs in the FSA file are the ones Roy Stryker punched out with his hole puncher.

This all reminds me of a remark of Dai Vaughan's, the BBC documentary film editor, when he commented that unedited "observational" film footage is "not the truthful, or even the objective, but quite simply the random."

On the side of the Art world, in their denial of the reality of the photograph's subject we have the appropriation of "documentary" for Art World's own purposes. In the extreme you have Lego assemblages and put on interpersonal poses labeled, amazingly, as "documentary." A further extreme is today's critical stance arguing that the images utterly encompass, in fact replace, the subject in our understanding. Ansel Adam's photograph of El Captain obliterates the mountain itself. (... a remark made by a Washington D. C resident, I might add.) The photograph is the subject. The subject no longer exists in our consciousness. This particular take on the subject as photograph is an assertion that I have never seen substantiated in the slightest.

What of today's Walker Evans, a young photographer who wishes to apply him/her self to exploring the WORLD, to create a substantial visual document?

If what the Art World tells is true, then any serious visual reporting is scarcely worth while, not to mention possible. The photographer must enlarge upon the world investing it with a personal vision which becomes the central focus. Going to the other side, with the historian and social scientist, the photographer must dumb his work to produce an artless vernacular. Clear out the vision thing would be the rule.

Perhaps its best for an aspiring Walker Evans to have an independent income. To be a photographer today outside of the comforts of an academic Art department is a very tough line of work.

### **Documentary Style**

What can we now say about Walker Evan's "documentary style," a style that responds neither to a worldly historian nor to the Art World's current aesthetic?

It is a style that turns us out into the World and demands that we participate in the World as the photographer shows it. We know that WE would not accept being called a documentary photographer. He refers to Art, which does no work and thus is not useful.  
[WE is wrong there.]

There is a part of WE that in my reading does not receive much attention, but which helps explain his "documentary style."

I met WE once at a function where he was playing a time honored role; he was a wedding photographer. The bride was the daughter of friends and the groom was a young photographer, David Plowden. Although formally trained by Minor White and Nathan Lyons, Plowden was very much attracted to WE's work, who quickly became a mentor.

WE and Plowden talked a lot about things photographers talk about-especially the light, the evening light from way up in the Time/Life building. But they also looked at many photographs together and paid especial attention to the World represented in them. Plowden tells me that WE liked to speculate about the photograph's content. What were the people in the photographs up to? He had a tremendous curiosity about these matters.

E.M. Forester, in an essay on Jane Austen, characterized her genius as being able to create "characters in the round." Referring to Miss Bates of Emma, Forester said she was so well drawn you were convinced she had a life outside the novel... And, as we learn from Austen's letters, was precisely what she intended.

Documentary film maker have a word for "in the round." They call it the "pro-filmic." Pro-filmic refers to the events that took place prior to the film and to the events that surround the film, that take place off camera. It appears that the film maker strives to imply as much of the pro-filmic in a documentary film as possible.

Taking into account WE's fascination about the doings of a photograph's subjects - both animate and man-made (he was not into grass and trees) we can think of one aspect of WE's documentary style as producing photographs that embed in their substance a photographic equivalent to a "pro-filmic." Thus, based on Plowden's recollection of their conversations, one aspect of WE's intentionality is the attempt to compel his "readers" to examine closely his work - to discover a very concrete "there" and from that "there" to infer a larger world.

There is a better understood - or at least more fully written about -aspect of WE's photography style which has less to do with his portraits -which link up so often with a "mug shot" aesthetic - as with his photographs of open public spaces.

[NB These two types-portraits and photographs of the World only occasionally get mixed in his work, as is well shown from American Photographs.]

This aspect was summarized by my daughter in one word, "detail." Julia was studying the FSA period and when she came to WE she at first drew a blank. But after repeated looks she came to "detail," as the essential ingredient.

We learn from Roman Jakobson that the basic feature of realistic writing is the extensive use of synecdoche, that figure of speech that presents a part for a whole. Thus the simile, "he has a fox face," is explained by synecdoches, viz. "pointed ears," "eyes continually shifting from point to point," "a sharp extended chin."

We can argue, following RJ, that WE made extensive use of visual synecdoches. And among the parts he amassed in his visual structures were public signs, especially product ads, but also an entire array of bric-a-brac scattered everywhere in the American space.

With these two angles in mind let me end by being unfashionable and hazard a definition, or a gloss, on WE's "documentary style" which would be "an implied pro-filmic accomplished by the careful arrangement of visual synecdoches." Or to remove Jakobson and the film

critics and go with E.M. Forester and Julia, we can rephrase the definition of documentary style as "detail in the round."

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The presentation was concluded by a showing of a selection of WE's photographs accompanied with a reading of e.e. cummings's POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL. What this particular poem holds in common with WE's photographs is its reliance on strings of synecdoches drawn from American commercial bric-a-brac. (viz. "comes out like a ribbon, lies flat on the brush.")