

What's documentary about photography?: From directed to digital photojournalism

Written by John Mraz



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Note to the revised version

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Commentaries provoked by the following essay – especially the abrupt and changes in the original by the

1. My intention in this essay is neither to malign esteemed photojournalists nor to question the courage n

Rather, the essay was written as one component of a more extensive analysis of documentary form, the

I want to test the oft-bandied notion that digitalization is the "death of documentary photography and pho

2. The essay forms part of a much larger study, recently published by the University of Minnesota Press

My interest in examining instances of directed photojournalism was in constructing a backdrop against w

3. In the case of the Rosenthal image, I have relied on the analysis of Martha Rosler, among others. As

[See the e-mail discussion between John Mraz and John G. Morris.](#)

Digitalization is the prime suspect in the much-discussed death of photojournalism and crisis of documentary photography (though “the end of photography as evidence of anything” is surely one among many instances of the postmodern retreat from the referent). Notwithstanding the undeniable impact of computerization on the credibility that is photojournalism’s bedrock, the unavoidable fact that so many of the most famous documentary images were somehow directed problematizes the effect of digitalization; it also offers insight into a worldview that has been quick to accept pictures as “candid” or “spontaneous,” when they were really constructed by photojournalists trading on the documentary aura.

I use the word “directed” to describe the genre of photojournalism characterized by the photographer’s intervention in the scene he or she is photographing, though the term “quasi-journalistic” might be more exact, since these individuals are working within the notions of non-interference and believability that reign in the contexts of news imagery. The following panorama of the more renowned cases of photographic direction offers a royal road through which to examine questions of authenticity and alteration, and to later extend it to the issues raised by digitalization.

I am here concerned with documentary photography and photojournalism, rather than what would be considered openly manipulated photography. Documentary credibility is based on the belief of nonintervention in the photographic act, and its discourse is structured into “codes of objectivity” that veil the effect of the photojournalist’s presence (Schwartz 1992). Conversely, expressly constructed photography explicitly announces that it has been created by an image-maker, thus establishing itself-the-photograph as a reality, while asserting that it is an illusion to believe that a photograph can show the real world.

It appears that O.G. Rejlander and H.P. Robinson made the first overtly fabricated photographs in the 1850s, and this genre has enjoyed a rich history as what we might call a “constructivist” alternative to the “realist” esthetic that has largely dominated photography. Among its many manifestations can be found the Pictorialist school of the 1890s, the photomontages of artists such as John Heartfield, the photograms of László Moholy-Nagy, the Dada-Surrealist experiments of Man Ray and, during the last thirty years, the Conceptual, Neo-Surrealist and Constructed imagery with whom we most often associate artists such as Duane Michaels, Les Krims, Cindy Sherman, and Joel-Peter Witkin.

The very thrust of explicitly manipulated photography is to critique the idea of realism, that a

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photograph is a window onto the world. As photojournalism is the medium that most embodies this ideology, artists such as Nic Nicosia have focused their efforts on exposing the illusions of graphic reportage by staging scenarios such as *Like Photojournalism* (1986), which recreate the violent and sanguinary scenes in which press photographers sometimes appear as part of the scenario.

Photojournalists have directed images in a variety of ways. In describing this genre, I have opted for a thematic approach, organized in a rough chronological order. Some of the categories I employ are well known within the study of art history, and have been utilized in analyzing constructed photography: the strategies of creating and/or restaging “living landscapes” (what art historians call narrative tableaux vivants), as well as arranging and/or rearranging still lifes. Other groupings have been suggested by photojournalist practices: the intervention in “real” events, and the use of “catalysts” to provoke reactions that the photographer has reason to expect will occur in “reality.”

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II

Living Landscapes

Directed photographs are predominantly composed through constructing and reconstructing narrative tableaux vivants, and the numerous instances of this genre offer fascinating tales. It appears evident that Jacob Riis, perhaps the first real photojournalist, staged scenes in which “Growler Gangs” of young men in New York recreated their technique, for Riis’ camera, of rolling drunks in alleyways during the 1880s. New York was also the backdrop for the archetypical tabloid lens-man, Weegee (the professional name Arthur Fellig assumed). On at least one occasion in 1941, he evidently convinced a mother to participate in [a scenario that replicated the ways in which the city’s inhabitants attempted to avoid the summer’s heat](#). Weegee had the woman take her scantily dressed children out on the fire escape, where they lay on top of sheets and pretended to sleep while he photographed them, as if the city were trapped in a heat wave (Rogers).

The complexities of “reconstructing” narrative photographs can be illustrated in the controversies surrounding Joe Rosenthal’s Pulitzer-Prize winning image of the flag raising over Iwo Jima in 1945. The photograph’s very perfection led Life’s editors to believe that it had been posed; concerned to protect the credibility they knew was their life’s blood, they initially hesitated to publish it. (Goldberg) Though not directed, the image is somewhat of a re-creation. A small flag had been raised earlier, under fire, and a [Marine Corps combat photographer had shot a picture](#). As the first group came down Mount Suribachi, Rosenthal went up with a Marine detail carrying a larger flag and pole. When this was hoisted, Rosenthal took the photo that became perhaps the most pervasively distributed icon in history. For Martha Rosler, this constituted “a postbattle replacement by a different set of Marines of the original, small flag planted earlier under fire.” Rosler implies that there was a significant difference between the dangers faced by the two parties, and she argues that, in the interest of Marine Corps public relations, “Both groups of men -- those who had

raised the original, smaller, flag during combat and those who had taken part in the second raising -- were repeatedly made to lie about the event." It appears clear that combat did not cease on Iwo Jima with the flag raising, and three of the men involved later died on the island (Goldberg)

Robert Doisneau would often see something he wanted to document but, unable to capture it, he would later stage what he had observed (Hamilton). The perfect example is his famous image, *The Kiss at l'Hotel de Ville* (1950). When this image became a stock item on the walls of students' quarters and in advertising campaigns throughout the developed world during the 1980s, he was contacted by at least 15 couples who alleged that they had been *les amoureux*. One couple filed suit to prove their claim, and the matter was even further complicated when the woman who had modeled for the *mise-en-scène* also sued for a share of the royalties. In 1994, the case was resolved in Doisneau's favor when he proved that the model had received payment for acting in the *Life* photoessay of 1950, where it had been claimed that these were "unposed pictures."

The contradictions of directed photojournalism -- which trades on the credibility of the camera as an objective and nonintervening witness but depends upon the control of the photographer over the scene -- are manifest in the most renowned narrative images produced under the Farm Security Administration. Roy Stryker, Director of the FSA, defended with almost his last breath what he considered to be "the picture" of that project, Dorothea Lange's image of the *Migrant Mother* (1936): "People would say to me, that migrant woman looks posed and I'd say she does not look posed. That picture is as uninvolved with the camera as any picture I've ever seen. I'll stand on that picture as long as I live" (Stryker and Wood).

Stryker's denial notwithstanding, research by James Curtis has uncovered the degree of direction that went into creating this universal icon of suffering and dignity. In the sort of brief encounter that seems to have been typical of FSA photography, Lange took six pictures of the

woman and her children in the space of ten minutes. Comparing the various images makes it clear that Lange had the woman and two children pose in different positions until she had the photo she wanted: the mother's face is framed by her hand, reflecting her anguish, and the children look away from the camera so as not to distract. Further, in order to create a picture acceptable to the urban middle-class readers who constituted the audience for FSA imagery, Lange excluded the woman's husband and four of her seven children.

Dorothea Lange never publicly acknowledged the direction that had gone into making *Migrant Mother*, but Arthur Rothstein's famous FSA photo, *Fleeing a Dust Storm* (1936), had a different history. In this image a father and his two sons struggle to reach home, apparently trapped in one of the innumerable blinding, suffocating dust storms that devastated the Midwest in the 1930s. The father labors against the force of the wind, and the older child keeps pace with him, looking up as if for guidance as they seek shelter. The younger child has straggled behind, arms upraised as if he were pleading not to be abandoned.

A magisterial document of life on the plains, and a powerful synecdoche for the splitting asunder of the family by the dust storm qua depression, it was also a product of direction. Rothstein evidently worked with the man and his sons to achieve the picture he envisioned, perhaps assuring their cooperation by appearing with a government bureaucrat who the local residents knew, and to whom they may well have been beholden (Curtis). The photojournalist had probably walked the family through their parts, having the older son turn toward the father in order to hide the large bill of his cap, and placing the younger child a few steps behind so that he could be cropped out easily if he forgot his instructions and looked at the camera.

In his 1943 essay, "Direction in the Picture Story," Rothstein described how he had realized the scene, "The picture of a farmer and his sons in a dust storm was controlled in this way. The little boy was asked to drop back and hold his hand over his eyes. The father was asked to lean forward as he walked." In this essay, the only extensive written argument by a working

photojournalist explicitly advocating the strategy of staging, Rothstein openly called for active involvement in the photographic act:

The photographer [must] become not only a cameraman [sic] but a scenarist, dramatist, and director as well.... Providing the results are a faithful reproduction of what the photographer believes he sees, whatever takes place in the making of the picture is justified. In my opinion, therefore, it is logical to make things happen before the camera and, when possible to control the actions of the subject.

It is revealing that Rothstein felt that a directed photograph would be most powerful when the photographer's intervention was not perceivable: "In conclusion, the idea of direction on the part of the photographer has its greatest value when its processes are least discernible to the spectator." His disregard for what might be considered the traditional approach to photojournalism can be appreciated as well in his remarks on "distortion". Rothstein believed that "It is sometimes desirable to distort or accentuate with lenses of various focal lengths," arguing that "Deliberate distortion may actually add to its reality." Rothstein later repented his candor, recognizing that the effectiveness of his pictures depended on their "believability," and he claimed, in an article published some forty years after the fact, "The photograph was unposed, not staged, the action and location were not changed" (Rothstein 1978).

Credibility is the underpinning of photojournalism, and doubts that have arisen around "authenticity" are at the heart of the most controversial case surrounding a narrative tableau, that of the Death of a Republican Soldier (1936), made by Robert Capa during the Spanish Civil War. In the midst of a bitter fraternal bloodbath, propaganda and commitment had priority, and today's concerns about photographic honesty took a decidedly second place to the immediate utility of images in battling for the allegiance of Spaniards, as well as in recruiting the outside aid upon which both the Republicans and the Fascists depended to a large degree.

According to a seasoned photojournalist who covered this cataclysm, P.H.F. Tovey, it was common to stage pictures: "Faking was the order of the day, even a tumble down cottage was used as a background and bodies placed in heaps to look like casualties of war. Men carefully rehearsed in their parts would fall as though shot at the blast of a whistle."

A glance at the newspapers of the period, and the photography produced by the foremost Spanish photojournalist of the war, Agustí Centelles, confirms the notion that many images were posed. When Capa's picture was first published during 1936 in the French magazine, *Vu*, it appeared together with another photo taken some minutes before or after, of a different man falling in exactly the same spot. This "coincidence" almost immediately opened up the suspicion that *Death of a Republican Soldier* had in fact been a training exercise staged for Capa's benefit, and one recent scholar, Caroline Brothers, feels that the second picture is probably the decisive bit of evidence that it was posed.

The question as to this photo's authenticity as an index of the event depicted would appear to have been resolved recently by the research of a Spanish historian (Whelan). Mario Brotons Jordà determined by the cartridge belt of the soldier that he had been a member of the Alcoy militia; Brotons then discovered the name of the only man from that town killed on Cerro Muriano, the fifth of September, 1936: Federico Borrell García. When he showed the picture to Borrell's brother, and compared it to family albums, the mystery seemed solved. I say "seemed" because some of the pictures evidently taken before the famous photo show Borrell and other men in "battle" scenes that appear to be posed; in one, three men are bunched together in what could only be described as a dangerously exposed position, one holding his rifle in a way that will guarantee a sharp kick to the face.

This may be because these soldiers were the “fanatical but ignorant fighters” that Capa described when recounting the story of making this photo to John Hersey, or it could be that the pictures were taken during a training exercise, as the war correspondent, O.D. Gallagher, has argued on different occasions (Knightly, Lewinski).

Whether Gallagher is right about the exercise or not, he opened up the issue of esthetic realism by recounting how Capa had told him that good action shots were a result of moving the camera slightly during the exposure, and being slightly out of focus. We will probably never know whether this was the tactic that Capa utilized, but it appears that photographers of the Spanish Civil War such as David Seymour (Chim) and the Germans, Hans Namuth and Georg Reisner, did experiment with creating movement within the frame as a way of making it appear that their photos had been taken in the midst of combat.

W. Eugene Smith was one of the most renowned photographers in the world during the 1950s, and is considered to be the master of the photoessay. He asserted that he almost never posed pictures, preferring instead to mingle quietly and let the world happen in its honest complexity, photographing as a nearly unobserved observer, or becoming an intimately accepted participant. However, for Smith, directing was evidently somewhat different than posing, for he also argued that, “The majority of photographic stories require a certain amount of setting up, rearranging and stage direction, to bring pictorial and editorial coherence to the pictures” (Smith).

One example is offered by the photoessay, “Country Doctor,” published in Life during 1948, and considered to be a watershed in the development of this genre. There is little question but that Smith steeped himself in the activities of Dr. Ceriani during the four weeks he spent with him, feeling that he had “faded into the wallpaper... [and] let the ideas come from the subject itself”

(Hughes). Nonetheless, the essay's closing shot, a powerful image of the doctor at two a.m., exhausted from operating all night and downhearted at having lost both the mother and baby during a caesarian section, appears to have been directed, for the negatives that follow this image show the physician standing in an impossibly awkward position (Willumson).

Smith's penchant for set-ups was particularly manifest in the photographs he made in Europe during 1950. Life wanted to publish a story supportive of the conservatives, who were attempting to take power from the Labour Party. Although Smith was partisan to Labour, he rented a cement truck, which bore a sign "Under Free Enterprise British Cement is the Cheapest in the World," as well as a bunch of cows that were placed in the middle of the land, blocking the truck's passage. Though the story was never published, the message of the image was pretty clear: an antiquated herd mentality had stymied capitalism, which needed an open road if it was to arrive before it hardened into uselessness.

Doing the story on the British elections was a bit of a trade-off for Smith, who wanted to go to Spain and do an exposé on the poverty and fear created by the dictator, Francisco Franco. Conscious of the role played by the Guardia Civil in Franquist repression, Smith got three members of that police force to pose for him, working with them until he had them facing the sun, and their grimaces could be taken for the hard-edged arrogance he wished to portray. However, Smith's need to direct scenes went beyond this. His assistant, Ted Castle, later recounted how they created the opening shot of the essay,

We spent damn near a whole day getting that action right, and the shot took almost three hours. I had to drag people around, motioning to them, 'You walk here.' 'You walk there.' 'I want you to walk along with your mule.' 'I want you to stand.' He'd finally say, 'Okay,' and I'd dash into a doorway and he'd click. Then he's say, 'Let's do it over again' (Hughes).

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III

Still lifes

Though (re)constructing narrative living landscapes has been the staple expression of directed photojournalism, the act of arranging and rearranging still lifes has also provided instances worthy of commentary. One famous example is the still life that has come to be known as “The Rearranged Corpse” of the U.S. Civil War. In July of 1863, Alexander Gardner was working with his assistant, Timothy O’Sullivan, photographing the Gettysburg battlefield. There, they evidently came across the body of a Confederate soldier lying in the grass where he had fallen when killed while advancing up a hill; both Gardner and O’Sullivan photographed him in that spot.

In his 1866 work, *A Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, Gardner titled this image, "[A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep](#)," and implied that this was a Federal soldier. After making three exposures of the corpse where they originally found him, the photographers were apparently inspired by the imagistic possibilities of a sharpshooter's position some forty yards away, built up by Confederate snipers in "Devil's Den." This offered an ideal location for photographing, as the embankment of flat stones made into a wall between two boulders provided a wonderfully textured backdrop. No bodies happened to be found in the pictorial setting, so Gardner had the soldier laid on a blanket, and carried forty yards uphill to "Devil's Den," where he was deposited against the photogenic background (Frassanito). The photographers placed the rifle against the rock wall to draw the viewer's eyes to its contours, and turned the corpse's head to face the camera.

Moving the body about cannot have been an easy or pleasant task: Marianne Fulton notes that the identical postures of the limbs indicate that it was probably in a state of rigor mortis, and "shows signs of advancing decomposition." The corpse must have been difficult to manipulate and, on a hot July day, rather odorous; but burial operations were drawing to a close and this may have been one of the last bodies available. In his book, Gardner titled the image made in Devil's Den (actually taken by O'Sullivan), "[Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter](#)," and placed it immediately after "A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep," thus constructing a face-off between the armies, based on the falsehood that the first had been a Northerner, and that they were two different men.

The FSA produced its share of directed still lifes, and the furor aroused by one reveals, once again, how much we believe photographs. Arthur Rothstein was working in the South Dakota Badlands during 1936, when he discovered a "prop" that placed him at the center of political polemics. As he later recalled, "I found a sun-bleached skull and photographed it against the cracked earth... I took many pictures and then moved the skull about 10 feet to a grassy spot near some cactus where I could get another effect" (Rothstein 1961). Rothstein contends that the five exposures he made of the skull in different places resulted from "experiments" with textures and shadows. However, opponents of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs took exception to what they considered government propaganda, and a North Dakota newspaper labeled the image "a wooden nickel."

Controlled by conservative corporations, the U.S. press was largely opposed to Roosevelt, and reporters unearthed all the negatives Rothstein had made of the skull. A scandal ensued, and the Resettlement program was attacked by many publications as a “ghastly fake” (Curtis). A powerful symbol of drought and death later acquired by art museums, Rothstein’s images of the cow skull entered into history as an example of “manipulation.” Its notoriety was such that fifteen years later, in 1951, Rothstein’s photographs were waved about on the Senate floor as Republicans cynically defended the infamous hoax concocted by the McCarthy forces in creating a composite photograph of Senator Millard Tydings and Earl Browder, the head of the U.S. Communist Party.

Beyond the immediate motivations of politicians, the “skull” images have become a lightning rod in discussions about documentary. Thus, in one of the finest studies on 1930s culture, William Stott contrasted Rothstein’s strategy with that of Walker Evans. Stott argues that the term “documentary” had a very specific connotation for Evans, which allowed for no intervention whatsoever:

Documentary, he says, is “stark record.” Any alteration or manipulation of the facts, for propaganda or other reasons, he considers “a direct violation of our tenets.” He was shocked when his FSA colleague Arthur Rothstein was found to have moved the cow’s skull, because “that’s where the word ‘documentary’ holds: 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’re not sticking anything in.” For Evans, documentary is actuality untouched....

Stott's argument articulately embodies the classical perception of documentary photography. Unfortunately, as the torchbearer for unmanipulated recording of reality, Walker Evans comes up a bit short. James Curtis compared Evans' images with the detailed descriptions provided by James Agee, his coauthor of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and revealed how Evans rearranged the houses of the tenant farmer families, while they were working in the fields, in order to construct harmonious scenes of dignified poverty. Hence, in an image of the bedroom, he apparently pushed a bed out from the wall to create a diagonal form that crosses like a sash from the top left to the bottom right, and he removed a dirty white suit which hung disconcertingly from the wall.

In another, the photographer evidently cleaned the kitchen table of the clutter of dishes which had been set on it in the morning by the family, leaving only an oil lamp that gracefully reflects the light; in the background, Evans placed a butter churn to resonate visually with the lamp, despite the fact that this valuable object would not have been placed in such danger within a house occupied by small children. The still lifes rearranged by Evans created a different world than that inhabited by the farmers; he photographed picturesque order instead of the tumbledown chaos in which they lived. James Agee reflected at one point, "The reason I love the camera is just this.... It is...unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" (Agee and Evans). Being neither entirely truthful nor at all dry, the esthetic fabrications of Evans gave the lie doubly to his partner's notion of photography.

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IV

Live interventions

The still lifes created by Gardner, Rothstein, Evans, and assuredly many more, are believable. However, intervening in “real,” live events would seem to ratchet up the credibility of images a bit more, at least theoretically. Here, instead of moving furniture, skulls or even dead people around, living human beings are recruited for scenarios without their knowledge. Although this would seem to be part of what I have defined as living landscapes, there is a fundamental difference: in the landscapes, people consciously participated in setups, here their very ignorance of what is really going on heightens the effect of the image.

One instance, mentioned above, is offered by Eugene Smith's conscription of the [Guardia Civil](#), who were used by him in a way to which they would surely have objected. Another example, certainly one of the more amusing, is the most famous of Weegee's photographs, *The Critic* (1943), in which two bejeweled and fur-covered women are confronted, on their arrival at the opera house, by a New York City “bag lady,” who seems to comment on the social distance between them. Although Weegee always maintained that it was only after developing the negative that he “discovered” the derelict looking at the opera patrons, his assistant, Louie Liotta, tells a different story (Barth). Weegee evidently had Liotta pick up a habitué of their favorite bar, “Sammy's on the Bowery,” and bring her to the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera. There, they waited for the limousines, passing the time away with cheap wine. When these well-known socialites appeared, Weegee had Liotta hold the “model” close to their path and release her in time to get out of the frame, hoping that she would be able to stand long enough to take a photo. Totally involved with Weegee's camera, the wealthy women seem

unaware of the “critic,” who they no doubt took to be part of the crowds that formed to watch celebrities arrive.

Setups that provoke a “real” response are yet another variation in the genre of directed photography. Two examples of this strategy can be found in photographs by Ruth Orkin and Nacho López of attractive women being “complimented” by men in the street. Both Orkin and López utilized the women as “catalysts” to provoke the famous piropo that is a common phenomenon of Latin cultures, and which they knew would result from parading their models by groups of men.

Orkin made [An American Girl in Italy](#) during 1951 in Rome, when she worked with a friend, Jinx Allen, to recreate the problems women encountered traveling alone: asking directions, paying with unfamiliar currency, ordering food, and dealing with impulsive young men. The idea for this picture had been in Orkin's mind for years, ever since she had been old enough to go through the experience herself, but she knew that she needed to have the right crowd, lighting, background, angle, and, above all, the right model in order to recreate the situation (Orkin). Orkin described Allen as a “great natural actress” who participated in staging the scene, walking by a group of men lounging on the corner of the Piazza Della Repubblica, while Orkin ran ahead of Allen and stood in the middle of the intersection to shoot. The photographer says she spoke only to the two men on the motor scooter, asking them to tell the others not to look at the camera. She took one photo of Allen passing the men, and then asked her to back up and repeat the scene, of which she took a second. Orkin's photo was eventually published in an article, “Don't Be Afraid to Travel Alone,” in the *Cosmopolitan* issue of September 1952, after several other magazines rejected it.

A photojournalist for Mexican illustrated magazines, Nacho López made a very similar photo in 1953 as part of a photoessay, “Cuando una mujer guapa parte plaza por Madero” (When a beautiful woman walks down Madero Avenue), the name which the essay's most famous image

has since acquired. López was well known for his directorial impulse, but his desire to control the action went beyond the strategies he had utilized before of having people pose, or of constructing essays from archive photos. Here, he created scenes by having Matty Huitrón, a minor if curvy actress with a wasp-like waist who had appeared in men's magazines, stroll by men in the street in order to produce the expected piropo. Though Huitrón's role was staged, the men's reactions were nonetheless entirely veridical, an effect provoked by the "woman-as-catalyst."

Documentary cineastes have employed this tactic of provoking responses, arguing that it is capable of producing events which are more "real" than those captured by "candid" film or photography. Both the Orkin and the López mise-en-scènes are created by an instigation similar to that later carried out by the documentary filmmaker, Jean Rouch, in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). In that film, Rouch attempted to incite his subjects to "moments of revelation," both through the question he asked, "Are you happy?", as well as by the camera's presence. The filmmaker believed that these were "psychoanalytic stimulants," which caused people to act in ways that were somehow more real than an unintervened reality. Rouch defined his strategy as *cinéma vérité*, in which he attempted to precipitate crises rather than wait for them to occur.

It would appear that Ruth Orkin only utilized this procedure for the one image she made in Rome. However, it held a certain fascination for Nacho López, who photographed the "Beautiful Woman" in several different situations, and then employed the strategy in a later photoessay, "La venus se fue de juerga por los barrios bajos" (Venus went partying in the poor quarters), where he had an employee carry a naked mannequin around in the street, and pose with it in a cantina. López reflected on his experiences in making "La venus":

I was walking through the area of San Rafael and saw a small mannequin factory. I was impressed by the variety of bodies, arms and legs that hung from a cord at the door. I went in and caught sight of a man with a saw cutting through the naked back of a female mannequin to

repair it. This seemed both grotesque and comic, and I thought of the possibility of using this material to make a reportage. It wasn't until two weeks later that the idea had matured. It occurred to me that the simple act of having the employee leave the factory with a naked mannequin under his arm could provoke psychological reactions among the people who encountered him in the street. It was only a question of being alert with the camera and following the employee at a prudent distance so that people wouldn't notice me. The nude woman and the serious employee produced a strange and incongruent sensation in the street. He walked ahead as if nothing, while interesting incidents occurred all around him: surprise, repudiation, admiration, shame, reserve, strangeness, etc., and even an indecent, unpublishable act. I think that this reportage can serve as an example of the result of a "previsualization" based on anticipating the human reactions provoked by objects, gestures, or sensations.

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V

Documentarisms

Nacho López's notion of "previsualization" offers a useful jumping-off point for understanding how directed photojournalism has differed from what might be considered to be the "metaphysics" of classical modern photography. Gretchen Garner argues that the paradigm for photography from the 1930s up until relatively recently might be encapsulated under the term "spontaneous witness," and asserts, "The act of photography has been cultivated by most modern practitioners as one of openness and alertness to chance and hardly ever with a mind-set of directing the world or, most of the time, even directing the picture." Garner bases this assertion on an overview of the ways in which different photographers of the 20th century have related to the question of direction versus discovery, citing Edward Weston, for example, "I never try to plan in advance.... I start out with my mind as free from an image as the silver film on which I am to record, and I hope as sensitive.... One becomes a discoverer."

Garner also cites Minor White, another important photographer and thinker about photography: "The state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank.... It is a very active state of mind really, a very receptive state of mind, ready at an instant to grasp an image, yet with no image pre-formed in it at any time." The invention of the small, light, and portable 35mm camera led to the development of an esthetic based on attention to what was happening around one, receptiveness to chance, and commitment to revelation; this resulted in a "hands-off authenticity" grounded in the belief that fakery was not acceptable within this convention. Of course, setups have clearly been based upon the credibility created by this esthetic, just as they have taken advantage of photography's new and unique status as an authentic index of the phenomenal world.

The supposition that the impulse behind the photographic act has been one of discovery and non-interference is particularly relevant to photojournalism, which combines the apparently transparent veracity of photography with journalism's seeming objectivity. A classical formulation of how photojournalists are expected to work can be found in Ed Reinke's statement published in "The News Photographer's Bible," the Stylebook produced by the Associated

Press: "As for photojournalism, and I emphasize the word journalism, we make photographs from the circumstances we are given and we don't try to alter those circumstances"(Horton).

Now, there is certainly a difference between what is permitted in "hard news," where the event largely controls the photographer, and "features," slices of everyday life and human-interest stories in which photojournalists feel freer to intervene. Almost all of the directed images we have seen above would come under the category of features, and their credibility is, to some extent, a result of certain "seepage" from the faith generated by "hard news" imagery. While the public may be somewhat tolerant of staging in features, they -- and the editors of periodicals who know that their sales depend upon the credibility of the stories they print -- have little patience with direction in "hard news."

Notwithstanding the direction present in many of the greatest of its images, photojournalism has a particular relationship to "reality." Though a discussion of what constitutes reality is beyond the scope of this essay, let it suffice to say that there is a real world independent of our perception of it. Though our way of seeing is mediated by a priori constructs -- "I'll see it when I believe it" -- we are most aware of that otherness when we bump into it; as Fredric Jameson is fond of saying, "History hurts."

Photojournalism deals with reality in at least two senses. On one hand, there is a requisite interaction with the social world; as Mexican photojournalist Julio Mayo stated, "We photographers are the infantry of journalism, because we always march in the front line. We have to go to the news, they can't tell us about it." On the other hand, because photojournalistic images are indexes as well as icons, they offer evidence of presence that can be summed up in the words of Roland Barthes, "That has been." As indexes, photographs are traces of material reality, deposited on film as a result of the collaboration of mind, eye and camera: the real key to photojournalism is having the sharpness of vision to discover, and the technical capacities to capture, the phenomena of the world. If it is an art, it is -- at least in the classical ideal -- an art

that attempts to find, rather than to create, the juxtaposition of the socially and formally significant.

Henri Cartier-Bresson is the photojournalist who most readily embodies the classical approach. He concisely defined his pivotal concept of "the decisive moment": "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression" (Cartier-Bresson 1999). The "decisive moment" is essentially a metaphor for hunting, the search for that confluence of content and form that the photographer must discover and be able to catch in an instant: "I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, determined to 'trap' life -- to preserve life in the act of living. I craved to seize, in the confines of one single photograph, the whole essence of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes."

Cartier-Bresson has been explicitly critical of directed photography: "The fabricated photograph, or set-up, does not interest me.... There are those who make photographs that have been composed beforehand, and there are those who discover the image and capture it" (Cartier-Bresson 1991). Insisting that he "takes" rather than "makes" photographs, his very unobtrusiveness enables him to sneak up upon "Things-As-They-Are," and capture the reality that he believes is far richer than imagination.

Cartier-Bresson's respect for and interest in capturing the irreducible variations produced in the real world reflect the influence that Surrealism had over him. In speaking of Surrealism, this photojournalist is careful to insist that he was attracted to its ideas, above all, "the role of spontaneous expression, of intuition, and especially the attitude of revolt," and he distances himself from its esthetics (Cartier-Bresson 1992). However, despite Cartier-Bresson's rejection of Surrealist photography, his own strategy is in fact quite in keeping with the importance of the "found object" in Dada and Surrealism, for example, the urinal that Marcel Duchamp entered in

a 1917 exhibit under the title of Fountain. A slice of ordinary life is picked almost at random, and acquires a new meaning by its recontextualization through the strategy of *dépaysement*, a well-known tactic of Surrealists that means literally to be taken out of one's native land; hence the ordinary, torn out of a familiar context and placed in a foreign situation, which enables it to be seen in a new way.

The surreality of Cartier-Bresson's photography is unrelated to the carefully orchestrated imagery produced by Man Ray or Hans Bellmer; instead, it is expressed in the capacity to uncover facets of everyday being that go unnoticed until the photographer reveals them through a process of intuition, and a mechanical reproduction akin to automatic writing. Hunting in the street for juxtapositions whose ironic contrasts would surprise people and make them see the world with new eyes, Cartier-Bresson carried forward the Surrealist project by linking it to the photojournalist ideal of the press photographer as a predatory animal lying in wait with a small 35mm camera to capture its prey: the real/surreal, the ordinary/fantastic surprises offered by world in its infinite variety.

Today's best-known photojournalist, Sebastião Salgado has consistently taken issue with the importance that "the decisive moment" has acquired, stating that he has had many fights with Cartier-Bresson because he disagrees with this idea and much of this kind of documentary photography (Mraz). Instead, the Brazilian asserts that photojournalism requires something different, a density of experience which derives from the photographer's integration into the context of that which he is documenting. In contrast to Cartier-Bresson's formulation, Salgado proposes what he calls a theory of the "Photographic Phenomenon":

You photograph here, you photograph there, you speak with people, you understand people, people understand you. Then, probably, you arrive at the same point as Cartier-Bresson, but from the inside of the parabola. And that is for me the integration of the photographer with the subject of his photograph.... An image is your integration with the person that you photographed

at the moment that you work so incredibly together, that your picture is not more than the relation you have with your subject (Bloom interview).

Salgado believes that the primary mediations of the documentary esthetic are the rapport which you have been able to establish with your subjects, and the knowledge that you have acquired about their situation; and he represents the extreme example of the photojournalist committed to long-term projects. Among other undertakings, he dedicated himself from 1986 to 1992 to photographing labor around the world, an enterprise that resulted in a huge exhibit and a large book, both entitled *Workers*. In 1993, he turned his cameras on the plight of refugees and emigrants, producing the enormous exhibition and book, *Migrations. Humanity in Transition*, 1993-99, published and exhibited in 2000. Through such extensive engagements, he avoids remaining at the surface of seeing only what he expected to see, and on various occasions, he has articulated the necessity of getting inside what one is photographing:

When you work fast, what you put in your pictures is what you brought with you -- your own ideas and concepts. When you spend more time on a project, you learn to understand your subjects. There comes a time when it is not you who is taking the pictures. Something special happens between the photographer and the people he is photographing. He realizes that they are giving the pictures to him (Lassiter interview).

Salgado's conceptualization of the "Photographic Phenomenon" may be new, but the idea that depth in photojournalism comes from the time you have spent with your subject has been voiced before. Phillip Jones Griffiths expressed it well when, in speaking of his experiences in Vietnam, he said, "As a photographer you see things first hand, things that haven't been filtered through some process of manipulation, so the more you see, the more -- hopefully -- you understand. The more you understand, the more you see, and in this process you become wiser" (Miller). So, it is no coincidence that the best photoessay of Nacho López is also the one in which he invested the most time, "Sólo los humildes van al infierno" (Only the humble go to

hell). And, the depth in Eugene Smith's "Country Doctor" is no doubt a result of the four weeks he spent working with the physician in Colorado. By the same token, recent critiques of FSA photography refer to the lack of investigation that characterized that project.

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VI

Digitalizing Photojournalism

How does the development of digitalized imagery affect photojournalism? What impact does this new medium have on the credibility that is the life's blood of the documentary? If so many

photojournalist images have shown themselves to be directed, what are the differences between directing and digitalizing?

There is little question but that digitalization is the future of photojournalism, and of photography as a medium. The ease and rapidity with which a digital image is ready to use, and the facility in transmitting it -- combined with the increasing scarcity of silver -- make it clear that chemical process photography will soon be limited to those who like working in antiquated techniques, such as individuals who make contemporary ambrotypes. However, the issues of journalistic credibility opened up by digitalization have produced a sharp reaction among those whose livelihoods depend on the believability of their images.

For example, the National Press Photographers Association of the U.S. issued a statement of principle at their annual Digital Imaging Workshop in 1990, stating that, because accurate representation is the benchmark of the profession, "Altering the editorial content of a photograph, in any degree, is a breach of the ethical standards recognized by the NPPA" (Harris). The ethical issue here is really one of the range of tolerance within the variations of photojournalism. As is the case with directed photographs, editors are much more tolerant of altering feature photos or photo illustrations than they are of manipulating news images. And, the uproar that accompanied the discovery of digital alteration in celebrated cases such as National Geographic's moving of the Pyramids of Giza or Time's digital darkening of O.J. Simpson's face indicates that the professionals connected to photojournalism are wary of this threat to their medium.

Pedro Meyer, the Mexican harbinger of digital imagery, argues that such after-the-act digital alterations are not significantly different from the anticipated coincidence of content and form of classic photographers: "The only difference is that they wait before the shutter clicks, and I wait afterwards" (Meyer 1995). Certainly, altering photojournalistic images in the darkroom was a practice known long before digitalization. Eugene Smith inserted a saw handle --and a hand to

grasp it -- into the opening picture of his photoessay on Albert Schweitzer, perhaps a rather strained visual synecdoche for the hospital construction the doctor was realizing. Yevgeni Khaldei (or Stalin's censors) evidently removed stolen watches from the arms of the Soviet soldiers who were waving a flag for the photographer over the Reichstag in Berlin, after the army had taken the city in 1945. The excesses of photographic manipulation under the Fascist regimes of Germany and Italy, the Soviet dictatorships, the reign of Mao in China, and McCarthyism in the U.S. are well documented.

However, notwithstanding the history of photographic alteration, the ease with which digitalized images can be transformed is a difference that could make a difference. In one of the first essays to consider the impact of digitalization, Stewart Brand argued, "It is so easy to fiddle with the images that the temptation is overwhelming." And, the fiddling may be done, not by those who were at the scene and experienced the event they photographed, but by computer technicians who have no sense of what really went on, and who alter images in line with a mentality increasingly governed by the conventions of advertising imagery.

Of course, computers can't manipulate images without human agency. As Meyer pointed out, "What is called 'traditional' photography can be produced either in an analog way using a chemical process or in a digital format, electronically" (Meyer 2001a). Nonetheless, the facility with which digital imagery can construct a scene makes it tempting to avoid lengthy and costly investigative photojournalism such as that undertaken by Salgado, or Cartier-Bresson's search for "the decisive moment" (which can now be constructed anytime in the computer), or even the interaction with unforeseeable social reality that was required for Nacho López to provoke the reactions of the men in the street to the beautiful woman.

However, if digital imagery has -- as Meyer argues -- "liberated" photographers from "reality," it nonetheless trades on the documentary aura of straight photographs when it reproduces what would be considered photojournalism. In this sense, digital images can take advantage of the

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semblance of having “been there” -- apparently in accord with the photojournalist refrain, “F-8 and be there” -- without having to invest the time and effort to learn about a situation, and/or to encounter the confluence of form and content that make documentary photography important and moving. Fred Ritchin spoke to this concern:

If you go to Beirut or Nicaragua as a photographer, you're in the experience and you try to interpret the experience whatever way you can.... We're borrowing from the credibility of the photograph to get something across that we haven't earned in a journalistic sense.... We use the easy credibility of a photograph, even though we weren't there, to pretend we were there or somehow to give ourselves the authority without having earned it” (Abrams).

Comparing three images by Pedro Meyer and Dorothea Lange offers the opportunity to explore differences between digital images, directed photographs, and documentary pictures. These photos rely on the same strategy to construct their narratives: the juxtaposition of significantly ironic elements within a frame. Meyer produced an image, Mexican Migrant Workers, California Highway (1986/90), in which we see men laboring at agricultural tasks, stooped over in a field beneath a billboard advertising “Caesars,” an inn which offers “Free Luxury Service From Your Motel;” in the sign, a Roman gladiator stands in wait by the fancy private taxi, opening its door for prospective customers who, presumably, will not include the poor souls straining below. Meyer stated, “I had no intention of waiting a week, ten days or the time necessary so that something would happen, so that I could get the ‘decisive moment’ looked for so often by photographers.... The specific ‘decisive moment’ wasn't to be found, it had to be created” (Meyer 1995).

Dorothea Lange had produced somewhat similar images while working for the FSA. She discovered billboards publicizing Southern Pacific Railroad, with advertising based around the slogan, “[Next Time Take The Train](#).” In one image, made in California during March of 1937, two men walk along the road with their backs to us, carrying their luggage; ahead of them is a

billboard for Southern Pacific Railroad. Here, the SP motto, "Next Time..." is accompanied by a call to "Relax," and the image of a man riding on a train, leaning back in a comfortable chair. About a year and a half later, again in California but during November of 1938, Lange came upon three families of migrants camping underneath another billboard with the same slogan ("Next Time..."), but this ad showed a man sleeping with a broad grin on his face, and included the appeal to "Travel While You Sleep."

I would argue that, of these three scenes, it is the image of the families camped beneath the billboard that most closely fulfills the classical documentary ideal of finding a "reality" in the world, and providing evidence of its existence as well as information about it. We see the broken-down cars, the pitched tent, and the emigrants' ragged clothing, among other elements. Though FSA photographers were not noted for carrying out extensive research on their subjects, the picture does include a significant amount of visual data, in addition to Lange's intentionally ironic capture of the spatio-temporal coincidence of such unequal sleeping accommodations. Lange's earlier photo, of the men walking along the highway with their baggage, is probably directed. The caustic comparison between the ways of traveling -- some people lay back in comfort, others trudge along with bags in hand -- is a powerful representation of class difference, but there is little information beyond that. Meyer's digital image has created the counterpoint between the agricultural workers and the sign. As he noted, "I saw the Mexican migratory laborers at some kilometers from the site of the billboard. I had made the association between the two scenes in my mind, but they were separated in space. The photos were taken in pre-digital times, before the existence of instruments to link these two moments" (Meyer 2001b).

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Meyer asserts that his interest was not just that of constructing a discourse about migratory workers, “although it is inevitable that it is ALSO that.” But, he would insist, it is more concerned with the experience of observing, and the ways of seeing opened up by digitalization, which offer the possibility of constructing a “historical” vision by incorporating the past into the perception of the present:

I would argue that this image has much to do with the memories through which we perceive. As we walk from point A to point B, we continually make associations between the things we see during that walk. Thus, it is not just a question of what presents itself immediately in this image, the ‘social’ commentary inherent in the inevitable irony of the billboard and the workers but, what is more important, a new discourse about photography. Though the ‘style’ would seem to fall within the genre of documentary photography, I am utilizing that in a way to subvert that genre. This is exactly the contrary of what documentary photographers do in their obsession to maintain the credibility of their images. The more they want to convince us of the photograph as a referent, the more convinced we are of the contrary. The subjectivity of the author is necessarily at the root of any photograph (Meyer 2001b).

Now, in part, Meyer's position is an important call for the development of a critical perspective on photographic imagery, be it produced by chemical or computer processes. And, it should be emphasized that Meyer is not pretending to be a photojournalist in his digital imagery, for he has clearly labeled his pictures as altered by putting two dates of production. He is governed by artistic rather than documentary conventions, and only a few of the images he has digitalized "play" with the documentary aura; most are obvious constructions, which would not even require the indication that they have been altered. Hence, Meyer is working as an artist, a field in which, like advertising, manipulation is not only accepted but also encouraged and rewarded. Nonetheless, though his work is not governed by documentary conventions, he has extended his argument on occasion to documentary photography.

Here, though he could have limited himself to noting that digital imagery does not necessarily produce a different sort of picture than does chemical photography, he instead argued for alterations that "enhance the veracity of an image" (Meyer 2000). Meyer believes that "photography per se, is tantamount to manipulation," and he asks: "What is the difference between my computer alteration, and the photographer who chooses his or her angle to place a camera? Or when the photographer asks, sometimes by nudging ever so lightly for those depicted to move their location to a more favorable light or position." He believes that "luck" has been the fount of photography:

I am of course not questioning the validity of patience that some great photographers have exerted in order to get at exactly the image that they imagined, but even when patience was at the core of such endeavors an element of chance would inevitably crop up here and there. I personally dislike the notion that my work would be determined mainly by luck (Meyer 2000).

It strikes me that Meyer is here setting to one side the difference between photography as a

technical image, whether produced by chemicals or computer, and other forms of visual representation. Whether a decisive moment is “found” by the straight/digital photographer in a coup of timing, positioning, and technical virtuosity, or whether, following Salgado, the primary mediations of the documentary esthetic are the rapport which you have been able to establish with the subjects and the knowledge that you have acquired about their situation, photography offers a fundamentally different approach to the real world than does creative manipulation. By conflating all forms of expression into subjective representation, we lose sight of what is different about photography. As Barbara Savedoff has articulately argued in relation to Cartier-Bresson’s classic picture, *Behind the Gare St. Lazare* (1932):

The leap might have been staged or the location misidentified; nevertheless, on the basis of this photograph, few of us would hesitate to say that the leaping man, puddle, ladder, and posters existed, if only for an instant, in proximity to each other.... Instead of the photograph being a happy confluence of reflected leaping figures caught at the decisive moment by the photographer, the possibility of digital manipulation would make the work seem much more contrived, and I believe it would give us less delight, or at least a delight of a different kind.... Those who grow up in an age where the photographic image is seen as fluid and manipulable may have trouble appreciating the aura of evidential authority surrounding traditional photographs.

But, evidence of what? Evidence, most importantly, of a world beyond and apart from our bellybuttons. The events of 11 September may well shake the U.S., and the rest of the developed world, out of its solipsism. As the former Picture Editor of Time, Arnold Drapkin, wrote in an email shortly after the attacks, “The aftermath of the terrorist strikes has exposed America’s [sic] shallow knowledge and understanding of today’s complex world in which we live. The media abdicated its responsibility to inform the public with insightful reportage, in-depth enterprise journalism, and hard news. Instead, they fed us softball lifestyle features that would ‘sell.’ We were entertained instead of educated” (Halstead). But, writing before 11 September, Fred Ritchin argued that the development of digital imagery is in fact simply part of a larger shift in paradigm:

Already the photographer as eyewitness, the photograph as history and memory, are becoming somewhat like the post-automobile horse.... With this technology [digitalization], the photograph can be newly orchestrated, made to fulfill any desire. The viewer cannot tell what is being depicted and what projected. The world, rather than speaking to us in the dialectic of the conventional photograph, imposing itself on the image as it is simultaneously being interpreted, becomes more controllable, and we become more capable of projecting and confirming ourselves and our own world in our own, or any other, image. (Ritchin)

In sum, digitalization seems to be as unavoidable as globalization. However, as important as acknowledging the victory of computer over chemical photography is the examination of its implications. Does digitalization necessarily include alteration? Will the documentary esthetic of discovery, of research, of receptiveness to chance disappear with the chemical process? I would argue that -- despite the many instances of direction, alteration, or manipulation in chemical photography -- the medium invented in 1839 made available to the world a new form of communication and a new way of preserving the traces of the past: technical images. This medium led to the development of a new esthetic, which we have come to call "documentary," that is somehow bound up with the real world in a way different from that of other forms of representation. If we make the mistake of throwing this baby out with the bathwater I fear we will all be the poorer for it.

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Note

This is a much-reduced and substantially-reworked version of a text taken from the last chapter, "Thinking About Documentary," of my book, Nacho López, Mexican Photographer, forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press. It was originally designed as a slide presentation with 80 images, of which a selection has been made available here.

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/mraz/mraz01.html>