

REVIEW ESSAY

“The Story They Tell”: On Archives and the Latent Voices in Documentary Photograph Collections

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Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism in Turn-of-the-Century New York

By Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom. New York and London: The New Press, 2007. xx, 268 pp. Illustrations. Notes. \$35.00. ISBN 978-1-59558-199-0.

The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration

By Stu Cohen, edited, with a foreword, by Peter Bacon Hales. Jaffrey, N.H.: David R. Godine, 2009. xvii, 183 pp. Illustrations. Notes. \$50.00. ISBN 978-1-56792-340-7.

Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field

By Anne Whiston Spirn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xvi, 359 pp. Illustrations. Notes. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-226-76984-4.

This Is War: Robert Capa at Work

By Richard Whelan. New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. 287 pp. Illustrations. Notes. \$70.00. ISBN 3-86521-533-8.

Documentary photographs at their best are among the “most remarkable human documents . . . ever rendered,” wrote American photographer Edward Steichen during the Great Depression. “Have a look into the faces of the men and women. . . . Listen to the story they tell, and they will leave you with a feeling of a living experience you won’t forget.”¹ Although the visual impact of such

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¹ Edward Steichen, “The F.S.A. Photographers,” in *U.S. Camera 1939*, ed. T. J. Maloney (New York: Morrow, 1938): 44–63.

images is direct and can be deeply affecting, the process through which they come into existence is more complex than Steichen acknowledged. Documentary photographers are typically motivated by the desire for change and to that end employ measures of subjective and creative latitude. The paramount goal of documentary photography is to highlight a social or economic problem, or direct attention to the horrors of a particular situation.² A great documentary photo, said war photographer Robert Capa, "is a cut of the whole event which will show more of the truth . . . to someone who was not there than the whole scene."³

Despite being heavily freighted with layers of political opinion and commitment to social change, documentary photographs are a "genre of actuality," intended by their creators to represent the truth, "the communication not of imagined things, but of real things only."⁴ Documentary photos are pregnant with meaning and replete with potential for historical insight when studied within the context of other documentary resources and approached with an adequate foundation of knowledge. Several new books about documentary photography have recently appeared. This review essay discusses four important new titles, linking my observations and insights to more general issues about the interpretation of images, the nature of archival collections, and the latent human "voices" in historical photographs.

Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism in Turn-of-the-Century New York grew out of a 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Preservation and Access Grant for the Jacob A. Riis Collection of the Museum of the City of New York. The NEH supported the creation of a database, the production of prints from Riis's negatives, and the creation of transparencies from his lantern slides. A second NEH grant, for Collaborative Research, funded studies of Riis's work and the world he lived in, including research in his papers and the translation of his pocket diaries, as well as English translations of his numerous publications in Danish newspapers (pp. ix–xi). One of the authors, Bonnie Yochelson, is the former curator of prints and photographs at the museum. The other, Daniel Czitrom, is professor of history at Mount Holyoke College. The book is divided into two sections, concerned respectively with history and art history. The first, by Czitrom, deals primarily with Riis's life and social conditions in New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the second, by

² Allan F. Davis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 17–23.

³ Robert Capa, *Slightly Out of Focus* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1999), xxi–xxii. The book, an illustrated memoir of Capa's photographic activities in World War II, was originally published in New York by Henry Holt in 1947.

⁴ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), ix–xi.

Yochelson, focuses more particularly on Riis's photographs and the ways in which his images were disseminated, reproduced, interpreted, and imitated.

Jacob Riis (1849–1914) rose from penniless immigrant to renowned public figure in America in the late nineteenth century. He was known throughout most of his life primarily through his published writings and public lantern slide lectures about crowded and unsafe tenements, urban conditions, and the Americanization of immigrants. The images projected in his lectures came from various sources, both his own photographs and pictures taken by professional photographers whom he hired. Riis was an impassioned reformer with a moralistic agenda who believed that helping the poor would give the rich a spiritual boost and that adopting the norms of the Christian home would uplift the poor (pp. 218–24). He did not consider himself a good photographer because he was, as he recalled in his autobiography, “clumsy and impatient of details.”⁵ His original negatives and lantern slides (ca. 1888–1892), thought lost after his death, were found in 1942 by photographer Alexander Alland, Sr., who specialized in taking pictures of New York's ethnic communities. Alland was enthralled by a secondhand copy of Riis's landmark illustrated book, *How the Other Half Lives*,⁶ and determined to track down the originals upon which the 1890 halftones had been based. He persuaded Riis's son to sift through the attic of the old family home on Long Island, a search that eventually brought to light the 415 glass negatives, 326 glass lantern slides, and 192 paper prints that constitute the Riis Collection at the museum (pp. 123–25).

Riis took many of the photographs he used in his illustrated lectures during surprise inspections of slum conditions conducted by government officials. Riis and his assistants tagged along with tripod, camera, and flash powder, and shot the scenes they discovered in dimly lit rooms, hallways, basements, and alleys. The pictures reveal overcrowding, filth, whole families bent over piece-work, scavenging, drunkenness, despair, and a host of other social problems. The images reproduced in the book probably compare in detail to lantern-slide projections shown during Riis's illustrated lectures, but the context of viewing them with other uneasy citizens in a crowded lecture hall can, of course, never be reproduced. Riis's visual exposé of deplorable urban blight was extraordinarily effective (he became a personal friend of President Theodore Roosevelt), but not unique. It was part of a much broader “visual turn” in the late nineteenth century, consisting of lantern-slide presentations by an assortment of reform movements, and engravings and woodcuts published in popular magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* (pp. 56–58).

The photographs Riis took or commissioned often seem posed or coerced. The subjects may well have been powerless, or felt they were, even when not in

⁵ Jacob Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 264–71.

⁶ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

the presence of policemen or government inspectors. The picture entitled "Slept in that Cellar Four Years" (p. 171) shows a man in a drunken stupor lifting his head from a dingy mattress supported by a plank on wooden barrels. The cellar floor is flooded. "Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters" (p. 152) depicts three ragged, barefoot boys huddled for warmth in the corner of an exterior wall. "The Baby's Playground" (p. 193) shows a toddler sucking his thumb in an unswept tenement hallway. A gap in the stairwell's rickety railing has been clumsily patched with string. The picture that speaks to me most directly is Riis's photograph of "Little Katie from the West 52nd Street Industrial School," ca. 1890–1892, reproduced from a vintage negative. The little worker, about ten years old, poses with sad resignation against the school's brick wall (p. 166). When asked what kind of work she did, she replied, "I scrubs."

The book is well printed, but its format is surprisingly small scale for a work focusing on visual culture, and it seems as though the publisher skimmed in that regard. But the writing is cogent, colorful, and informative, and the integration of images and text works well. It serves as a valuable short introduction to Riis's life and work and to social reform movements in America between 1880 and 1914.

The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration puts the photographs produced by the U.S. Farm Security Administration's (FSA's) Historical Section during the grim years of the Great Depression in the context of their commission. The FSA was a government agency established to promote national support for New Deal programs in the 1930s. Roy Stryker, the economist who headed the FSA's documentary initiative, believed that documentary photographs "should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person looks like, but . . . must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness . . ." ⁷ Journalist Stu Cohen's excellent introductory essay outlines the major factors that must be considered when viewing the immense visual product accumulated through the FSA. His concise but multifaceted summary includes such topics as The Collection as Social Documentary, The File as Socio-Historical Evidence, The Photographs as Works of Art, and The Photographs as Government Propaganda. Peter Bacon Hales revised and edited the introduction, like the rest of the book, after Cohen's death in 1995.

Most of the images selected for inclusion, although sharp and brilliantly composed, seem disappointingly dry and unaffecting, at least to viewers like me, more accustomed to the evocative and emotionally gripping photographs of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. They are surprisingly matter-of-fact in their depictions of agricultural workers, migrant labor camps, factory hands,

⁷ Roy E. Stryker, "Documentary Photography," in *The Complete Photographer*, ed. William D. Morgan, 10 vols. (New York: National Educational Alliance, 1942–43), 4:1364.

unemployed miners, church groups, beer halls, greasy spoons, one-room schoolhouses, heavily laden trucks, Main Streets, billboards, movie theaters, rickety porches, crumbling stoops, farm auctions, picnics, sharecropper's shacks in need of repair, general stores, and other settings and situations. The pictures with which I engage most closely, aside from a small selection of Lange's photographs, are those taken by Sheldon Dick, documenting a sit-in strike at the Fisher Body Plant in Flint, Michigan, in January 1937 (pp. 89–93). In one image, the strikers, who occupy an idled automobile factory, read newspapers while lounging on car seats arranged like furniture in a parlor. Their attitude signals, "We are here for as long as it takes." In another picture, a young striker whispers to his fiancée, who glances nervously at the camera (a "sit-down strike romance," suggests the caption). To my mind, her face says, "I am afraid of what might happen here. The future frightens me." A related image shows very young National Guardsmen posing with a machine gun overlooking a car factory. One of them points the automatic weapon into the darkness that lies beyond reach of the flashbulb while another smirks.

The photographs reveal a cross-section of the lower end of the American socio-economic spectrum during the Great Depression, representing many occupations, regions, and activities. But assumptions that individual photographers with vision set out freely to document the soul of a country in duress are dispelled by reading Stryker's "shooting scripts," several of which are reproduced in their entirety. Stryker, from his desk in Washington, D.C., gave detailed instructions to his team in the field about how and where to find illustrations of "everyday life" across the country. The shooting script (p. 173) for "Railroads and Their Place in the Life of America" includes the following documentary blueprint: "The Waiting Room: Seats; Ticket window; Bulletin Board—train schedules; Excursion advertisements; Local advertisements (business houses and churches, etc.); Water cooler or drinking fountain; Vending machines; Magazine, news and candy stand; Lunch counter; People in waiting room; Mothers with children; Men and women with baggage; People asleep; People eating lunches; People buying tickets." The script (p. 175) for "American Habit" itemizes such targeted activities as "Eating: ice cream cones; corn on the cob; watermelon—southern towns (see Missouri); picnics; barbeques; hot dogs—cokes in bottle." It often seems as though Stryker envisioned storyboards and extras for a film according to preconceived notions instead of promoting open-ended photographic field research.

FSA photographer Russell Lee explained to *U.S. Camera* in 1941 that he hoped the documentary project would show a steel worker in Pennsylvania what a sharecropper in Louisiana looked like, "what kind of house he lives in, how he works, what he wears, how he plays, and the problems he's up against" so that when a bill came up that supported aid to southern sharecroppers it would get votes from workers in the North, and vice versa. But, he continued, "The idea is even more than that. As the name of our outfit indicates, the

Historical Section is accumulating a file of pictures which may endure to help the people of tomorrow understand the people of today so they can carry on more intelligently" (p. 14).

The handling of FSA images typically worked according to a prescribed pattern. Each photographer sent his or her film back to Washington for developing and printing. Images would then be returned to the photographer in the field for captions before being sent back to Washington to go on file.⁸ The Washington office aggressively offered selected images to pictorial magazines and newspapers for free use. But conservative elements in government and elsewhere objected to the FSA photographic project, disparaging it as New Deal propaganda that detracted from the image of the United States by placing undue emphasis on poverty (pp. xxv–xxvi).

The person who originally classified and filed the FSA images in Washington was John Vachon, who split his time between designing the photographic archives and working as a photographer on the project. Vachon grouped the images by state and assignment (the locale to which the field photographer had been dispatched). He then subdivided each assignment into additional groupings, such as "Small Town Scenes."⁹ Stryker enlisted the support of strategic contacts within FDR's administration to find a permanent home at the Library of Congress (LOC) for the FSA harvest of more than 170,000 photos at a time when he feared (with good reason) that political enemies might use their influence to have the files destroyed. Paul Vanderbilt, head of the Prints and Photographs Division at the LOC, was the archivist who continued, expanded, and revised Vachon's work. Vanderbilt organized the files according to what he saw as main subjects, such as health, housing, and farming.¹⁰ As Stryker wrote to Lange in 1943, "The file, I feel certain, is safe and will go into the proper hands. Some very strategic people are now supporting it. . . . Vanderbilt has made good progress and will really do something in the way of setting up a file that will make history" (p. 34). During World War II, the the OWI, or Office of War Information, succeeded the FSA. The materials at the LOC are now known as the FSA-OWI collection.

The best book about an individual FSA photographer to appear in years is *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field*, which highlights a selection of Lange's remarkable images and photographer's notes in the Library of Congress. The volume opens with a prologue in her own words,

⁸ John Vachon, *John Vachon's America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II*, ed. Miles Orvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

⁹ Richard Dowd, transcript of interview with John Vachon, New York, 28 April 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁰ See Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in *Documenting America, 1935–1943*, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988).

followed by Anne Whiston Spirn's informative introductory essay, "Dorothea Lange and the Art of Discovery," exploring the context and significance of Lange's work. Part 2, the core of the book, consists of Lange's photographs, captions, and field notes, primarily from 1939. The final section, "Then and Now," relates Spirn's journey to places photographed by Lange to see what has or hasn't changed since the 1930s. Spirn, an MIT professor, is also a talented photographer.

Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) was a San Francisco portrait photographer who reinvented herself in 1933, taking her camera out of the studio and into the street as the effects of the Great Depression visibly deepened. Her iconic image of an old man hardened by misfortune ("White Angel Breadline," p. 16) dates from her first day out. "I was compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around me," she later recalled. "You look into everything, not only what it looks like but what it feels like. . . . Out of that sort of attention great photographs will be made" (pp. 3–4). Spirn met with several people who knew Lange in the 1930s, one of whom demonstrated how she used her Graflex camera, film holders, and exposure meters, tools that facilitated and empowered her remarkable photographic instincts and vision (pp. xiv–xv). She examined photographs, general and individual captions, field notes, memos, research reports, published articles, recorded conversations, and correspondence between Lange and her supervisor, Roy Stryker.

Lange had a contentious relationship with Stryker, who recognized her genius, but was bothered by her strong will and ongoing challenges to his authority. He finally fired her in December 1939. One of the most troubling friction points was her inclination to spend much of her time doing background research and interviewing the individuals whom she met and photographed. The two were also at odds over Lange's attempts to assert more control over her negatives and the prints made from them (pp. 29–31). FSA photographers usually sent exposed rolls back to D.C. for developing. Stryker selected which pictures he wanted published, typically in wide-circulation newspapers and magazines, and did not hesitate to punch holes in negatives that he didn't like. But despite their increasingly rancorous relationship, Stryker exempted Lange from the obligation to follow shooting scripts. Some of the scripts, in fact, were modeled on her work to provide effective examples for less experienced photographers.

Lange's composition and lighting, as well as her apparent ability to establish rapport with her subjects, set her work apart from that of other FSA photographers. Thorough notes augment the value of her pictures as historical traces, as the following example (pp. 164–65), seen on the cover of this issue, illustrates:

GENERAL CAPTION NO. 27

DATE: August 8, 1939

PLACE: Yakima Valley, Yakima County, Washington

SUBJECT: Migrant families in the Yakima Valley

Three migratory families camped in "Rambler's Park" on the banks of the Yakima River. Two of these families are traveling together. There are 15 people in the group. One of these families has nine children. They came originally from Northeastern Oklahoma, and have been migrating with the crops since 1936. Note: Still carrying a roll of kitchen linoleum. They have come into the Yakima Valley to work in the pear harvest. Pear growers do not provide housing or camps. The wages (season 1939) are 4 cents a box, and they quote \$1.90 per day as average day's wages, but work is highly irregular . . .

The general caption links to a set of images, each of which has its own caption, such as: "August 8, 1939. Yakima Valley, Washington. Migratory children, living in 'Rambler's Park.' They have lived on the road for three years, nine children in the family." The image shows two apprehensive children by the tailgate of an overloaded farm truck. A battered suitcase sits on the ground while stained bedding and cartons tied with rope are jumbled between the truck's wooden sideboards. A huge roll of tattered kitchen linoleum stands out amid the clutter. The homeless family may have been carrying it around for three years, or may have picked it up somewhere on the road. It seems to symbolize a hope that better days lie ahead.

The image of a hop picker and her squirming children at the service counter of an Oregon contractor's company store is seen in more meaningful context because Lange recorded how much the woman earned and what she purchased. Her morning's wages came to 42 cents, which bought "1 lb. Bologna sausage, 1 package Sensation cigarettes, 1 Mother's Cake." A sequence from the Napa Valley (a fertile fruit-growing district in California) shows a hobo's bundle and shoes near railroad tracks in one frame and a wizened hitchhiker in another. "Napa Valley, Calif. Dec. 1938," reads the second caption. "More than 25 years a bindlestiff. Walks from the mines to the lumber camps to the farms. The type that formed the backbone of the IWW in California, before the war" (pp. 162–63).

Lange's work affords vivid insights into a troubled period in America's past. The images themselves speak with eloquence, but their message is underscored and clarified by words, the observations and quotes, the voices from the past, that she assiduously preserved. "A photograph," Spirn explains, "can embody a complete thought or an entire story, [and] a series of photographs can shape a narrative or make an argument. Words tap the ideas that the visual holds. . . . The photographs are not illustrations, nor are the texts explanatory footnotes to the images" (p. xi). The book is effectively designed as an exploration of the informative interplay between Lange's photographs, captions, and field notes.

Cultural commentator Susan Sontag believed that any "understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is . . . chiefly a product of

the impact of . . . images.” Although we are surrounded by nonstop imagery delivered through television, movies, and streaming video, “the photograph has the deeper bite . . . when it comes to remembering . . . , a quick way of apprehending . . . a compact form for memorizing . . .” When the camera became easily portable and was equipped with a variety of lenses and a range finder that enabled close-up shots from a distance, picture-taking acquired “immediacy.” Photographs speak with authority when conveying impressions of war.¹¹

I have read many books about war photography. The best I have seen about the work of an individual war photographer is *This Is War: Robert Capa at Work*, published in conjunction with an exhibit at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York (26 September 2007–6 January 2008). Cultural historian Richard Whelan, who researched the exhibit, died in 2007 after selecting images, developing an organizational scheme, and drafting the text. The book includes excellent reproductions of photographs, contact sheets, caption sheets, handwritten photographer’s notes, and magazine layouts. Careful study of such materials, maintained in the Robert Capa and Cornell Capa Archive at the ICP, reveals how Capa’s fieldwork, thinking, and creativity interacted with the mediation of editors, resulting in the images and texts by which his work is best known. Whelan’s approach is to examine in unprecedented detail the circumstances surrounding examples of Capa’s work to gain insight into photojournalism in its formative years. “Capa’s individual achievement could then be seen as part of a larger story: that of the revolution in visual journalism that reshaped news media in the twentieth century” (p. 8).

Robert Capa (Endre Friedmann, 1913–1954) was forced to leave his native Hungary in 1931 because of his leftist student activities. He migrated to Berlin, where he worked as an errand boy at a photo agency, advancing rapidly to dark-room assistant and soon afterward to photographer. He fled Germany after Hitler’s rise and made a living in Paris, Vienna, and Spain as a photographer and photojournalist. He and his girlfriend/manager, Gerda Taro (a talented photojournalist in her own right), invented the name “Robert Capa” because of its indeterminate nationality. Taro sold Capa’s pictures to European editors by representing him as an elusive American genius and did not bother to correct English-speaking editors who assumed that he was Spanish. His work appeared in the form of photographic essays or “photo-stories” (pictures, captions, narrative) in such magazines as *Life*, *Vu*, *Illustrated*, *Collier’s*, *Regards*, and *Picture Post*.

When the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, Capa and Taro went to Spain to cover the Republican government’s resistance to Franco’s Fascist rebels. Taro was crushed and killed by an out-of-control tank while photographing a

¹¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 21–24.

confused retreat from the running board of a car in 1937. Capa intermittently covered the war in Spain until the defeat and exile of the Republicans in 1939 and went on to cover many events during World War II, most notably the Normandy invasion. On D-Day, surrounded by incessant gunfire during the first wave of allied landings, he frantically shot frame after frame. "I didn't dare to take my eyes off the finder of my Contax," he recalled. "I reached in my bag for a new roll, and my wet, shaking hands ruined the roll before I could insert it in my camera." He soon found, seized by "a new kind of fear shaking my body from toe to hair, and twisting my face" (p. 235), that he was incapable of reloading film or taking more photos.

This Is War begins with a succinct history of photojournalism before Capa's era and during his formative years (pp. 11–50). The core of the book analyzes in depth a representative sample of Capa's mature, war-related photo essays: "Falling Soldier" (Spain, 1936); "China" (1938); "The Battle of Rio Segre" (Spain, 1938); "Refugees from Barcelona" (Spain, 1939); "D-Day" (France, 1944); and "The Liberation of Leipzig" (Germany, 1945). Whelan's earlier biography of Capa is justly famous,¹² but this new work serves as a corrective to conjectures in the earlier book that were founded on misleading testimony or less-than-complete information. It is the best argument I know for the preservation of complete photographic archives and critical analysis of their contents.

Whelan's detailed exploration (pp. 52–87) of Capa's controversial "Falling Soldier" picture (depicting a soldier whose knees are buckling at the exact moment of his death) is an exemplary exercise in the use of archival visual resources to clarify an event and humanize a story. The details of the investigation are too complicated for summary here, but analysis of prints, copy negatives, photographer's notes, and personal testimony confirms that the man's death was not faked or staged, as some have alleged in attempts to impugn Capa's credibility. The soldier was killed by enemy machine gun fire (p. 75) while posing for Capa near the front during a lull in the action (not while charging forward in the heat of battle). The controversy over the image's authenticity undermines but can never completely erase its impact as a symbol of Republican Spain breasting the onslaught of fascism.

Capa offered his humanistic antiwar perspectives to readers through photographs of men in combat as well as images of uprooted refugees. He believed that war, with its mechanized assaults on land and aerial bombardments, was brutal and brutally anonymous. He hoped to mobilize antiwar sentiment by exposing its costs in the form of individual suffering, distilling an event's significance into a few telling images and assembling them in a coherent sequence of human drama. A *Picture Post* spread entitled "The Tragedy of

¹² Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

Spain” shows wrecked carts and wagons, dead mules, and scattered chattels in the wake of a Fascist aerial attack on fleeing civilians. “They flew low over the road,” he wrote. “They saw the pathetic conveyances of the refugees. They machine-gunned them from the air, and flew away. There was nobody to stop them” (p. 189). The caption for an image of soldiers scurrying over smoky, rock-strewn terrain in a photo essay for *Life* reads, “A wounded man is rushed out of the firing by two comrades . . . , one of the surest signs of high morale. . . . Rattled men worry only about themselves” (p. 151). His report on the 1939 Barcelona retreat adds dimension to a haunting photograph of a little girl slumped in exhaustion on a pile of sacks at a refugee transit center. “[Her] eye follows my every movement,” his notes read. “It is difficult to work under such a gaze . . . , to be in such a place and not be able to do anything except record the suffering . . . ” (pp. 194–95).

Capa died in 1954 after stepping on an antipersonnel landmine while covering a French convoy in Indochina. His work is the standard against which war photography is still measured. His personal motto (and advice to other photographers) was, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.”¹³ American novelist John Steinbeck, writing about Capa in memoriam, said that war can’t be photographed because “it is largely an emotion.” But Capa captured it by positioning his camera beside it. “He could show the horror of a whole people in the face of a child. His camera caught and held emotion.”¹⁴

“When is a photograph made?” asks photo historian Geoffrey Batchen. Is it when the photographer presses the shutter, or when a frame is selected for printing, “investing a latent image with the personal significance of selection, labor, and, most crucial of all, visibility?” Or perhaps a photograph only comes into existence when the image is exposed to public gaze, “adding itself to a culture’s collective visual archive . . . to enact some sort of residual effect.”¹⁵ Such exposure can include the discovery of telling details in documentary photographs about adaptability and resourcefulness, family and community, camaraderie, faith, despair, loneliness, survival, abandonment, defeat, the hopes and ambitions that sustain people during hardship, and other matters.

Historian Peter Burke reminds us that we cannot understand what happened in the past “without the assistance of a whole chain of intermediaries, including not only earlier historians but also the archivists who arranged the documents, the scribes who wrote them, and the witnesses whose words were recorded.”¹⁶ We should not forget that documentary photographs have a complex history.

¹³ Capa, *Slightly Out of Focus*, xi.

¹⁴ John Steinbeck, as quoted in Capa, *Slightly Out of Focus*, ix–x.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 83.

¹⁶ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 13.



Robert Capa, "Young girl at refugee transit center, Barcelona, 15 January 1939." 1473.1992.
Copyright, Estate of Cornell Capa / International Center of Photography.

Fuller readings based on pictures in context with captions, photographer's notes, negatives, contact sheets, documentary assignments, biographical data, and quotations from or observations about subjects yield more balanced and incisive historical interpretations. Evaluation must consider the possible motives of the photographer, the background and circumstances of the subject, the intended and actual uses of the image, how and by whom it was collected and preserved, how it was processed and cataloged, and how its presence in an archival repository, museum, or digital database affects ways in which it might be viewed, influencing the meanings that it might acquire.

The most effective documentary photographs are moving and evocative. The faces they frame are marked by anomie, fatigue, determination, fear, bewilderment, joy, bitterness, grief—human experience captured, or expressed, in a durable format. Even documentary photos devoid of people record their circumstances—rundown houses, rented rooms, battered Fords, makeshift tents, table settings, worn-out shoes, dusty lanes, company stores, planted gardens, ruined farms, bombed roads, shelled towns, refugee camps, and so forth, the scenes and objects of people's lives, evoking inferences about how they lived, or wanted to live, and what was important to them.¹⁷ Photographs invite viewers to look first at the surface and then “think . . . feel . . . intuit” what lies beyond it to understand “what the reality must be like if it looks this way.”¹⁸

Archivists should collect, preserve, and describe as complete a record of documentary projects as possible to promote and extend understanding of documentary photographs. Sensitive and historically grounded readings of documentary photos improve with experience and cultivation. In some situations, the interest, cooperation, and encouragement shown by archivists can be a researcher's major asset. We can and should facilitate the exposure and contextualized interpretation of unheard, neglected, or endangered voices embedded in historical records, including documentary photos. Only then can we, our contemporaries, and those who come after us, “look into the faces” of the nearly forgotten and “listen to the stories” that ought to be heard.

¹⁷ See, for example, the photographs by Walker Evans of walls, corners, tables, and fireplaces in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001). The book, a classic juxtaposition of images and text, was first published in 1941. See also Sherry Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reprint ed., 2001), 23. Note, however, that many visual researchers are prone to “ventriloquism,” substituting contemporary voices and concerns for the voices more authentically contained in documentary photographs. Visual literacy, predicated on wide reading, extensive viewing, and multilayered thinking, is a considerable, if not complete, safeguard against this phenomenon. For further development of this point see Jeffrey Mifflin, “Visual Archives in Perspective: Enlarging on Historical Medical Photographs,” *American Archivist* 70 (Spring/Summer 2007): 32–69.