

Documentary photography bourke- white essay

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Margaret Bourke-White was an early leader in the American documentary photographic tradition. She was born in New York, attended Columbia University's Clarence White School of Photography, and first made her mark in her twenties as an industrial photographer in Cleveland, Ohio.

Henry Luce hired her as a staff photographer for his new magazine *Fortune* in 1929, and in 1936 rehired her as one of the first staff photographers for *Life*, for which she took the first cover photo, a view of the massive Fort Peck Dam. Although remaining freelance, she stayed with *Life* for most of her career, leaving in 1969 because of Parkinson's disease. First as an architectural photographer and then as a photographer of industrial subjects in the Middle West, Bourke-White drew upon the technical expertise of others to make dazzling photographs of previously impossible subjects – steel mill interiors alight with molten metal, crane-and-derrick aerial views of architectural interiors, and the like. As a *Life* staffer, she was a pioneer of the photo-essay a genre that implied the exploration by a photographer of an issue, place, or social situation in a more or less leisurely manner that reveals its character and dynamics.

A leading photojournalist, one of only a few female war photographers, and the first woman attached to an army unit, she covered both the Second World War and Korea. As a seasoned press photographer, she was with General Patton at the liberation of Buchenwald, and her photographs of the released prisoners are among her most haunting. She photographed Gandhi's campaign for independence in India in the late 1940s, and racial and labor struggles in apartheid South Africa in 1949-50.

During the Depression Margaret Bourke-White collaborated with southern novelist Erskine Caldwell, to whom she was married briefly. They collaborated on a project about southern sharecroppers, resulting in 1937 in the widely circulated publication of *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Caldwell and Bourke-White “ used only the material that sustained certain images of the South, and set the rest aside” (Snyder, p. 398). At that time Bourke-White was the most famous and commercially the most successful photographer in America, due in part to her work for *Life* magazine and for photographs of Soviet Russia and of the drought on the Great Plains. (Signorielli, p.

25) The photo essay *You Have Seen Their Faces* established Bourke-White’s further reputation. The images in this book are captioned with quotations gleaned from the conversations Caldwell had as Bourke White shot: “ The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors’ own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed, they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons” (Bourke-White and Caldwell, frontispiece). This paper focuses on the array of images presented in *You Have Seen Their Faces* and highlights the key points of these photographs as to discuss their potential of documentary photography. *You Have Seen Their Faces* is a photo essay of the sixty-four excellent photographic studies of sharecropper South. The subjects of 1930s documentaries were the last remnants of a rural order of pride and hard work, which had its roots in the soil of the Midwest or the South. Because each image implies to be truthful, these visual accounts of an ever-receding past hold power over our present imaginations. They do so through their

content – their straightforward presentation of space, objects, people, and form – their black-and-white simplicity, purity of line, depth of field.

Traveling through the rural South in 1936 accompanied by her husband, Erskine Caldwell, Bourke-White used melodramatic camera angles and lighting. However, it can hardly be noticed that she showed people amidst their environments. Her subjects are rather represented from artificially romantic views. For example, her photograph of a farmer Man in pith helmet is taken from low camera angles so that he was dramatically outlined against the sky, but the land he farms is not even visible. Another thing that stands out in this photograph is Bourke-White's signature style, 'the caterpillar view,' which she achieved by "literally crawl[ing] between the legs of my competitors and pop[ping] my head and camera up for part of a second," (Bourke-White, p. 147) which is unseemly here.

It displays her arrogance toward her subject as she purposely images white tenant farmer from unflattering low angle. This image is also characterized by extreme close-up, as many other her subjects, particularly when they had grotesque features. This is made for the purpose to heighten the emotional impact of her images. The way this man is standing suggests that he posed himself in an informal but presentable manner.

The pictures Poor woman sitting on town mattress with baby and Man lying on mattress are the images of black people whose faces express defeat; their eyes are filled with pain. A ragged woman is lying on a rotted mattress with a palsied child. The message of these two images implies that the people depicted there do not make a single effort to change the current

state of affairs. The indolent postures of depicted figures make viewer believe that those poor are the first to be blamed for being poor.

If we saw them picking cotton or working in trench the impression would be different. In overall these photographs establish a negative stereotype of the rural poor. On the other hand, the photograph Black schoolchildren shows a classroom stuffed with black children, whose postures suggest that they are talking and humming and as if waiting for someone to come or something to happen. The figures of privation snatched by Bourke-White appear full repositories of truth despite the distorted, staged, rearranged, and posed elements of each image. Some of Bourke-White's photographs of sharecroppers in the discussed group are on the whole more romantic than realistic. The pictures like Smiling young boy with stray hat or Old Black woman, smiling and reveal smiling faces suggest the lush natural abundance traditionally associated with the Deep South.

In contrast, some realistic photographs like Poor woman sitting on town mattress with baby or Man lying on mattress show notable excess of rags, dirt, disease, and depressing environment. And there is the type of photograph which cannot be marked as romantic or realistic; the pictures of this type are rather neutral in their expression, like Man in pith helmet and Black schoolchildren. These faces are recorded apparently because they make interesting subjects rather than because they contain any very explicit social message. These photographs lack individual character, consistently describing its subjects as frozen images, as if poverty has flattened their human personality. This group of images gives the impression that Bourke-

White entered into the poor blacks' private space and clearly marked off class and racial positions by preserving the distance between her self and audience and the photographic objects. Bourke-White's images chronicle the displacement of bodies from land as it is rearranged from part of a human community into an abstract commodity, often with a keen sense of irony. Therefore, we, her audience, 'have seen their faces' but still know nothing of them – not their names, their occupation; they are just people of the rural South. Though Margaret Bourke-White helped to define the image of the photojournalist in the popular imagination, her photo essay *You Have Seen Their Faces* loosely adheres to the standards of documentary photography.

It was amidst the ruins of rural America that the most poignant images of the Depression were found. The gold diggers became integral part of an urban landscape gleaming with the skyscrapers. But the land, on which a whole way of life had survived, was the place which could preserve original beauty. Portrait photographers found the effects on populations through the telling details found on individual faces. Perhaps as a means of differentiating it from photojournalism, to which it is closely related, documentary photography has to focus less on its role in recording reality than on its ability to demonstrate the need for change. Bourke-White's photographs are deprived of such feature.

Documentary photography often concentrates on people who have been passed by – or who have refused – the commodity culture in which its audience is immersed. They are perhaps simply too poor to participate, or have temporarily been removed from it by some events, or they are ill at

ease with their environment, migrants or exiles who bear in their minds and bodies the memories and customs of another world. Documentary photography is most often valued for its power to persuade and educate, making these two functions its most significant roles in dealing with the issues of social and political problems. Works Cited List Bourke-White, Margaret. *Portrait of Myself*.

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