

Language of Photography

—How Photographs Communicate—

By

Bob Rogers



© 2016 - Bob Rogers

Chapter Four: Subject and Object

All photographs require an Object to photograph. All photographers have a unique point of view that gives the photograph a Subject

The expectation that the camera doesn't lie was present in photography from the outset. The lens' ability to record optical detail with mathematical consistency formed the basis of this belief, and throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries the scientific camera was seen as standing in for the absent observer, recording events in a way that was believed to reflect "reality." To this end, the camera was considered to be a "faithful witness." The first national park in Yellowstone, for example, was created only after Congress saw the photographs made by William Henry Jackson and realized that descriptions of spectacular landscapes that had been reported by travelers were indeed true and not just tall tales as many believed them to be. Similarly, NASA sent cameras to the moon with the Apollo flights to create reliable visual records of what had been seen as well as to generate popular support for their space projects.

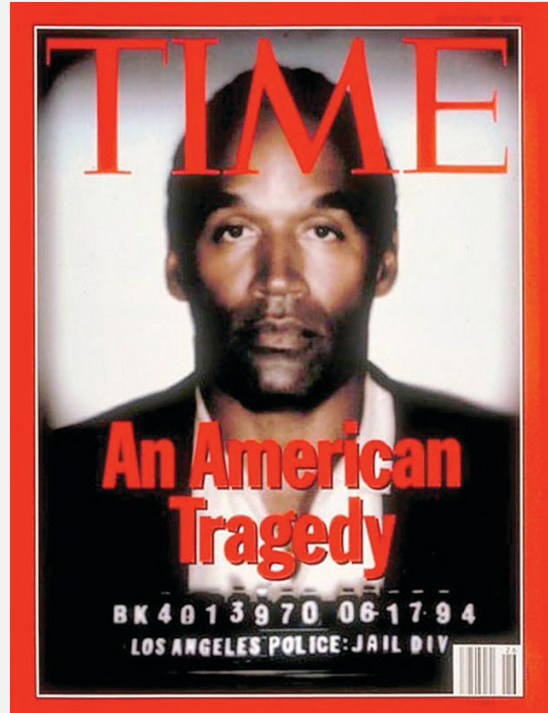
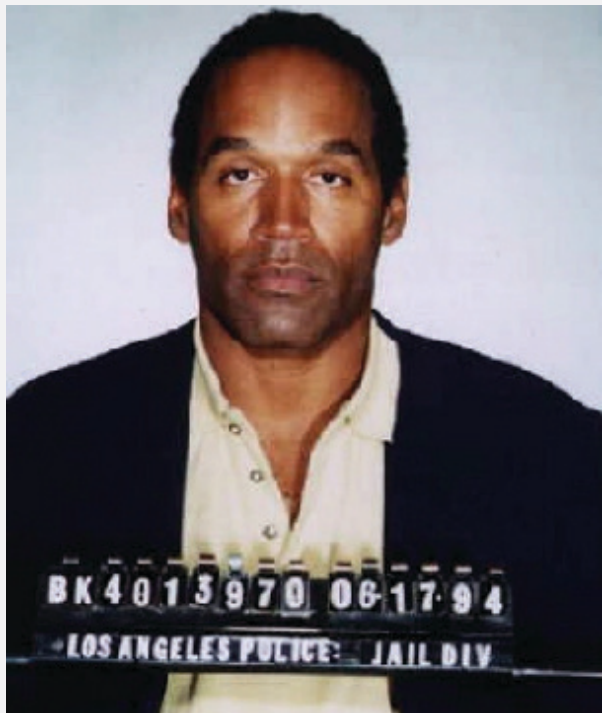
This faith in the lens remained unchallenged through the end of the twentieth century. However, with the development of the possibility for virtually seamless digital manipulations available to anyone with a personal computer, this faith began to be eroded. Nonetheless, the belief that the camera's image can be a truthful and accurate description of what was "seen" endures and continues to form a crucial, albeit, in light of the explosion of AI imagery, a diminishing element of the camera's image-making power.

Whether you use the camera as an artist or a scientist, in order



John Heartfield, Hitler, the Superman, Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin, 1932

to make a photograph you need an Object in the real world to put in front of the lens. Unlike painters, photographers cannot make images of dragons or angels with a camera. Although today it is possible to create such imagery with computer programs like Photoshop that digitally manipulate photographic images, this is a process more akin to collage than photography. Yet, even if you Photoshop an image, the underlying photograph must begin with an object. In the pre-digital world, artists such as John Heartfield used photographs as the basis for their montage work, and prior to the development of high-powered computers that could manipulate images in virtually imperceptible and undetectable fashions, the artificiality and improbability of the result were part



The digital darkening of O. J. Simpson's complexion for the cover of Time magazine made him appear more threatening and "guilty." The manipulation was exposed when other magazines such as Newsweek printed the same photo, but unretouched. Through their choice of lighting, moment and composition, photographers have always "manipulated" their imagery to affect the understanding of their photographs, however, it has always been one of the unspoken rules of the art that once the image has been made, it should be generally left alone. Newman's character assassination of Krupp (see Chapter 1) was equally effective, but not considered "an unfair practice" because it took place in the viewfinder and not on a computer screen or under the enlarger.

of its charm. No one would consider Heartfield's portrait of Hitler as anything but artifice designed to communicate a political point.

Today, image manipulation of varying degrees can be found in media and even the press, manipulations that are neither obvious nor stated as such. Until the alteration is revealed, the image is assumed to have been produced *au naturel*. The darkening of O. J. Simpson's complexion for his *Time* magazine cover portrait is only one example of the controversies that have been stirred when such manipulations have been exposed. Without much success, *Time* editors attempted to deflect criticism by referring to the cover as a "photo illustration."

Despite the camera's ability to create images with an intrinsic technical "objectivity," the personal point of view of the photographer has also been an element in photographic image making since the beginning. Each photographer has a unique position with regard to the objects that they photograph. That position can be emotional or intellectual, or simply physical; we all experience an identical event differently, if only for the fact that we are standing in a unique physical location different from everybody else's. We also bring to our experiences a unique history — we have all traveled to that particular location in time and space along different routes. So that even if photographs of the same person, place, or thing are created by several photographers, the point of view of those photographers has to be unique. How unique, and how well that unique point of view is presented, determines the originality and "freshness" of the resulting image. This point of view is the basis for a photograph's Subject. It is what makes the image "subjective" and personal. If the Object is what the photograph is "of," then the Subject is what it is "about."

In 1869, Edward Muybridge photographed Yosemite Valley. His interest was exclusively in the nature of the Object, the optical facts about the landscape that the camera recorded. Seventy years later, Ansel Adams photographed the exact same landscape, but his Subject, his point of view, was very different. Adams, a Romantic, was interested in



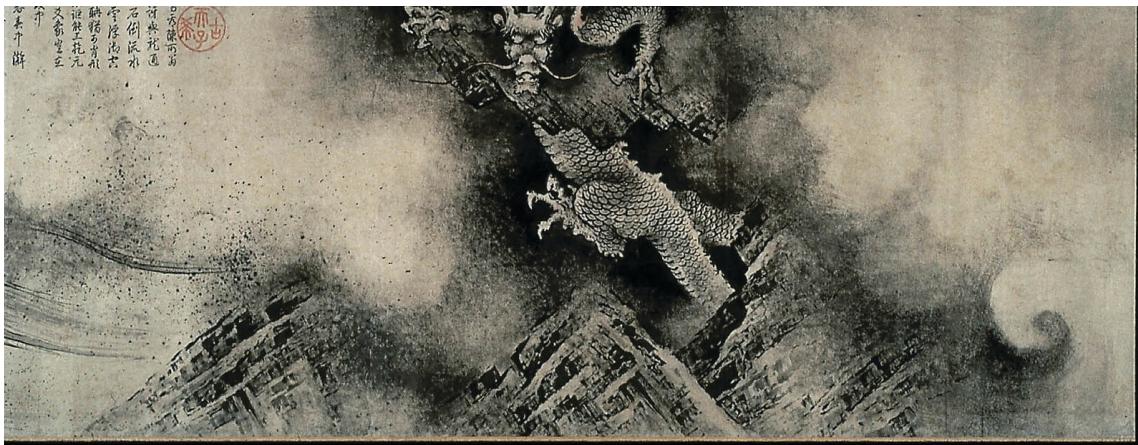
Eduard Muybridge, Yosemite Valley, 1869



Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley, ca. 1937*

communicating his idea of what landscape means, its spiritual power, its mystery. In both images, the Object is identical, but the Subjects are very different. Adams communicates his vision by carefully choosing lighting — the cliffs on the left are in shadow; the light highlights the arched back of the Half Dome — a moment when the clouds obscure much of the mountains and create a mood of mystery, and a lyrical design: the sweep of the clouds, the division of the image into four slightly off-centered quadrants, and the curved arc of the mountains.

Ansel Adams’ “vision” was that of a Romantic who saw nature as powerful and mysterious. The clouds in his image suggest the clouds in Chen Rong’s Song Dynasty masterpiece in which dragons cavorting in swirling mists represent the power of natural forces. As a result, his image has more in common with Rong’s imaginary dragons than Muybridge’s faithful accounting of Yosemite’s rugged terrain.



Chen Rong, *Nine Dragons Scroll, 1244*

The relationship between the Object and the Subject will vary within each photograph. Some photographs are almost entirely about the object. In that case, very little of the photographer's unique perspective intrudes into the image. These photographs tend to be scientific in nature, and the photographer seeks to remove himself or herself from all but the technical aspect of the process.

Other photographers seek, mostly through manipulation and montage, to use photographic imagery to



Wilson A. Bentley, Snowflake, c1919



Masayoshi Sukita, 1969

create impossible visions that, like the Surrealist movement that inspired them, represent an inner world that has no actual corollary in reality. In such images the Subject all but obscures the Object. However, most images fall somewhere in the middle, and it is the tension between the two elements of Object and Subject that gives much of modern photography its intellectual and emotional impact.



W. H. Jackson, *Pikes Peak Carriage Road*, 1890



NASA, *Lunar Rover*, Apollo 17, 1972

Two pictures taken a century apart of vastly different Objects — the earth on the one hand, the moon on the other, a space-age lunar rover and a horse and buggy — have virtually identical Subjects. In both cases the photographers are recording their means of transportation, creating a historical record as well as using the internal components of the image to establish a sense of scale that communicates similar feelings of isolation and humility in the face of a vast natural landscape.

That said, even scientists, who often look to photography as an objective, fact-recording tool, can have their subtle biases, and edit and select images or views to support their theories. Timothy O’Sullivan, for example, was famous for his photographs of the west that he made for the Alexander Gardner Geological Survey of 1872. He was a follower of the naturalist Louis Agassiz who developed a theory of evolution in opposition to Darwin’s theory of natural selection. As a result, O’Sullivan’s images tended to focus on natural phenomena that supported his contention that change in nature was not slow and imperceptible, but the result of sudden cataclysmic events of nature.

Other arts have a similar separation between the explicit and the implicit content of a work. In acting it is called “text and subtext.” The text is the actual words the actor speaks. The subtext is the overlay of meaning that is imparted through gesture, expression, phrasing, timing, and emphasis. This overlay can reinforce or contradict the underlying dialogue depending on the point of view of the actor or director. The same line can be delivered in a multitude of ways with varying inflection and nuance to produce an almost infinite variety of meaning. Think of the almost infinite ways the line, “I love you,” can be delivered. This overlay of interpretive meaning lies at the heart of many arts including music, poetry, theater, film and, of course, photography, as exemplified by Weston’s Pepper, which connotes human form far more than one would normally have expected of a garden vegetable.



Edward Weston, Pepper #30, 1936



Edward Weston, Nude, 1934

The tension between Subject and Object does not have to be literal or overwhelming. The subjective component can be an idea, mood, a nuance, a subtle feeling about the way a thing is experienced that results in a slight, but meaningful shift in the direction of the viewer's understanding of the object. This shift in alignment need only be of sufficient magnitude that we give pause, and understand that the otherwise familiar person, place or thing being presented in the image can also be seen from an original, unfamiliar, or unique perspective. It is not so important how abruptly we are wrenched from our familiar perceptions of things, but rather that in some respect we are given a new "take" on the familiar, a new interpretation of the commonplace. Musicians do this frequently, interpreting and reinterpreting familiar music in ways that can be as dramatically different as the "Star Spangled Banner" sung by Kate Smith and Jimi Hendrix, or simply a nuanced bending of a note, a shift in rhythm, timing, or beat. Actors, too, reinterpret roles that have been performed a thousand times, bringing audiences new understanding to a familiar character or scene.

Metaphor

In literature, metaphor, the use of verbal images and the images evoked in the imagination of the reader by them, is used to communicate the "subtext" of the author. When asked what language he thinks in when he writes, the Somali writer and poet Nuruddin Farah replied, "I don't think you think in languages. I speak six languages, but I don't think you think in languages. I think you think in images, in the same way you dream in images. It's the image that comes."

In literature and poetry, metaphor is a figure of speech that makes an implicit, implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics. In other words, two things not usually thought of as similar are shown, by some shared characteristic, to have a similarity that

*"Even on Central Avenue,
not the quietest dressed
street in the world, he looked
about as inconspicuous as a
tarantula on a slice of angel
food."*

— Raymond Chandler,
Farewell My Lovely

illuminates both elements. In photography, as in literature and poetry, the presentation of narrative information alone does not necessarily communicate the full intent of the photographer's understanding of the Subject of the image. The narrative is created by the lens using light, time, and the organization of these elements within the frame. This forms the visual exposition of the Object.

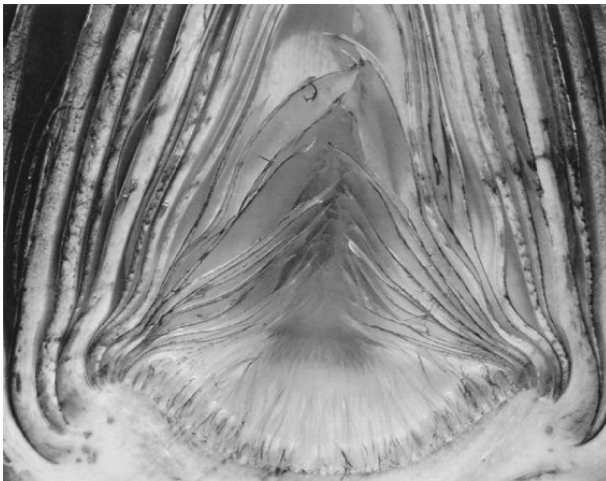
However, the point of view of the photographer, the subtext to the narrative,

is also engendered by the particular arrangement of these elements chosen by each photographer. In a portrait, that point of view can be affected by the fraction-of-a-second difference between a frown and a smile, or the cast of a shadow. This is the whole point of photography as a language: to communicate the photographer's understanding and significance of the objects that they are engaged with.

Through the choice of lighting, time, or design, one can portray a person, place, thing, or an action as being something other or more than what it actually is; one can create an image that is, effectively, a visual metaphor. This allows photographers to express abstract ideas or make references to intangible aspects of reality far beyond simple narrative descriptions of physical objects.

Edward Weston's photograph of a halved artichoke, like Georgia O'Keeffe's painting of an iris, is suggestive of something other than a flower. However, in a photograph, the contrast between the reality of the subject matter (the Object) and its yonic allusion (the Subject) is much starker than O'Keeffe's painted ambiguities. In photography, it is this clash of subjective perceptions with optical realism that communicates the photographer's vision by forcing the viewer to see two levels of content at once: the factual object and the photographer's subjective point of view.

If this juxtaposition results in an experience for the viewer of something new or unexpected, it can produce a delightful feeling of discovery. It would seem impossible to communicate an abstract idea such as "heat" in a form that utilizes only patterns of black, white, and grey on a two-dimensional surface. But in Margaret Bourke-White's image of the steel worker at the Ford Motor plant



Edward Weston, Artichoke, 1930



Georgia O'Keeffe, Black Iris, 1926

(see illustration on page 71) she utilizes light in a way that literally appears to melt away the edges of the steel railing to communicate just that, a sensation that is felt and outside of the camera's ability to directly record. The protective body language of the steel worker additionally informs the viewer of the underlying concern of the photographer: the power and intensity of the molten metal, not only outside of the capacity of the camera to collect and record, but in this case, even outside of the frame itself.

The power of photography to communicate a range of ideas or feelings lies in the ability of the photographer to construct a subtext, the subjective point of view of the photographer, which overlays a representation of an otherwise familiar or commonly experienced object, creating a third element, a metaphor, that reverberates with meaning — a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The resulting image then effectively becomes evidence for the fact that this subjective, personal vision of the photographer is objectively and transcendently true.

There are two critical issues that are necessary to create an effective visual metaphor. As Michelangelo purportedly said about sculpture, “In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.” No more of the Object or Objects that supports the metaphor than absolutely necessary should be included in the image. Nothing extraneous. In other words, an image needs to be “cropped” internally, not only along its outer edges.

Secondly, one must know as clearly as possible the meaning—the Subject one wishes to overlay on the elements within the frame—and use light, time, and composition to give it dominance over the normal understanding of the Objects depicted. To do that effectively, one must be clear about one's own reasons for making the image. This requires reflection and insight into one's own intent. Photographs that are not effective are generally filled with things—objects and visual elements—that are not relevant to supporting the overlay of the point of view of the photographer. The most common reason for this is that the intent of the photographer is not sufficiently defined in their own mind to identify and then craft the overlay that forces the viewer to see the content of the photograph in a new, striking, or compelling way.

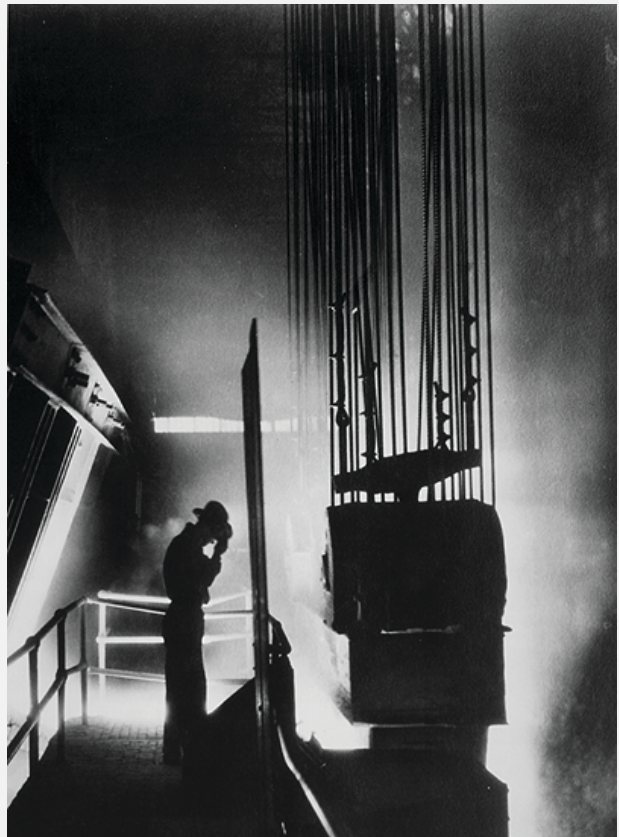
Socrates famously said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Subsequently, a corollary was added: The un-lived life is not worth examining. Both the unexamined and the un-lived life are equally not worth photographing. That said, every photograph is taken with an intent, albeit very often that intent is preconscious or unconscious. Insofar as every time one stops, raises



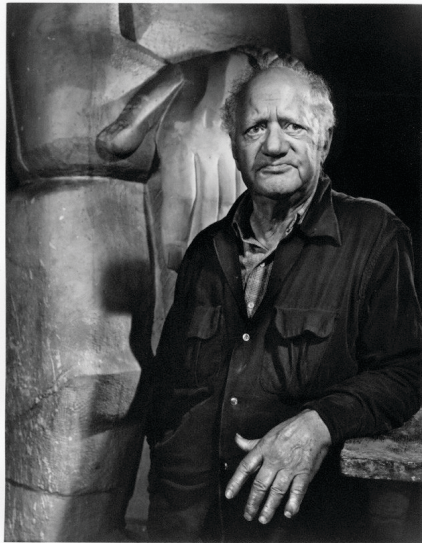
Robert Frank, from the Americans, 1955

Robert Frank's image of the young man looking at a juke box has many complex layers of meaning, from the role music plays in American culture, to the alter-like quality of the technology that delivers it to mass markets. Even though structurally there are many similarities with Bourke-White's image of the solitary worker at the Ford Motor company, the sub-text, the meaning and the metaphor, are starkly different.

Margaret Bourke-White, Open-hearth Mill, Ford Motor Company, Detroit, 1929



the camera, and makes an image there is some impulse, some necessity, some unique interest in making that image at that moment, at that time, in that instant. On some level everybody knows why they took a particular photograph, but all too often do not know that they know it, or can articulate the reason after the fact, if asked. It is critical to reflect over time on the images one has made, to try as best as possible, to understand one's own intent, so as to be able to hone one's ability to most effectively utilize the elements of the language of photography to communicate and express those ideas, feelings, and concerns that engage us throughout our creative lives.



Yousef Karsh, Jacob Epstein, Sculptor, 1955



Richard Avedon, George Wallace, 1963



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, "Los Agachados", 1934.



Lisette Model, Gambler on the French Riviera, 1937

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

— William Blake
(from *Auguries of Innocence*)

What makes a photograph original is not necessarily the fact that the Object being photographed is new or unfamiliar. Sometimes, the most ordinary, everyday objects or occurrences can form the basis of discovery. Here, a similar situation, e.g., a white stripe down the center of a road, is used as the basis for communicating very different concerns. Harry Callahan sees the road purely as abstract design and form, while Robert Frank



Harry Callahan, *Chicago*, ca. 1949



Dorothea Lange, *The Road West*, 1938

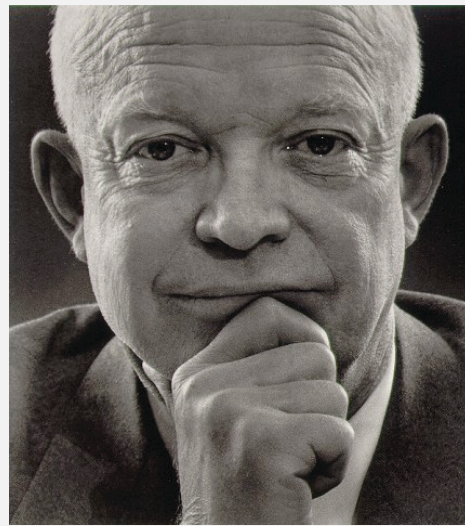
views it as a place of solitude and a symbol of the vast open beauty of the American landscape. Notice the small car in the distance. Was it approaching, or did he park it there and walk down the road to take the picture? Dorothea Lang's image encompasses aspects of both.



Robert Frank, *U.S. 285, New Mexico*,
from *The Americans*, 1955



*Richard Avedon, Dwight D. Eisenhower,
1964*



*Arnold Newman, Dwight D. Eisenhower,
1950*

Two portraits of President Dwight D. Eisenhower by two great portrait photographers — each sees in the former president a subtly different vision of the man. By using lighting, a moment, and cropping, each photographer takes the identical subject and makes us see it as they want us to see it. Viewing each photograph separately, we might discover in the image a truth and feel we have understood something about the person, never realizing that that discovery was planted in the image for us to find. If we embrace the discovery as “true,” we credit the photographer with insight and “vision.” If we reject what we see, we think of the sitter as a victim of the photographer’s hostility or malice. Paparazzi delight in capturing glitterati in off moments that reduce them to ordinary human status. In such cases the edge of the hatchet can never be sharp enough.

Photojournalism

Photojournalism represents a subset of the relationship between Object and Subject as the photojournalistic image is not only in a personal, visual form, but also lies within a collective, narrative, storytelling tradition. In the latter case, the image serves essentially as an illustration of the caption (the news story) and if it is overlain with too much of an identifiable, personal subtext, it stops serving the interest of informing and supporting the essential story and devolves into a vehicle for expressing the photographer’s personal point of view. In that case it is called “documentary photography,” and the photographer’s subtext is expected to offer commentary rather than additional, non-editorialized clarity. The job of the photojournalist is to report, not editorialize, and to the extent

that this precludes having a clearly identifiable point of view the photojournalist is limited in the degree that he can create a subtext that diverges from the text. There is a tendency, in such cases, to reduce an aspect of the tension in the imagery, which generally lies in the tug-of-war between the text and the subtext. In photojournalism, that tension is replaced by the drama of the underlying story. When this occurs outside of photojournalism, when this lack of tension becomes intrusive, the image is generally considered to be too much “on the nose.”

In photojournalism the photographer uses light, time, and composition to tell the story and reinforce or illuminate the underlying essence of what is happening without shifting the meaning of the subtext away from the essential narrative. When this is done well, the viewer gets a deepened sense of understanding of what is happening—the significance of the event. It is a hard balance to strike because the job of the photojournalist is to be a reporter, and the role of creativity is to bring the viewer a deeper understanding, not originality or invention, or a new idea.



Margaret Burke-White, A Moneylender's House, India, 1947

Margaret Bourke-White’s image of an Indian moneylender has, as the Objects photographed, the moneylender, his home, and two men who have come to negotiate a loan. All the elements of the image — light, the moment, and the composition that define the objects—speak to the underlying facts of the photojournalistic story. Yet, at the same time, there is a skillful use of these elements to enhance the telling of that story. For example, ninety percent of the design is concerned with objects of value. They dominate the image. The body language of the three men expresses the character of their relationship. The man in white is comfortable and “at home,” the other two, uncomfortable and awkward. The moneylender is dressed in white and blends into his furnishings; the borrowers

are dressed in darker clothes and stand out from their background. All this represents not so much the photographer’s personal, unique point of view, but rather her understanding of the story that is unfolding before her lens.



Weegee, Booked on suspicion of killing a policeman, 1939.



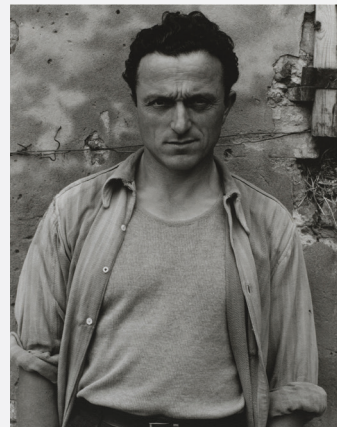
W. Eugene Smith, Dr. Ernest Ceriani Following the Loss of a Mother and Child During Childbirth, 1948



Paul Strand, Young Boy, Gondville, Charente, France 1951



Paul Strand, Postmistress and Daughter, Luzzara, Italy, 1953



Paul Strand, Young Man Luzzara, Italy, 1953

Where Weegee sought to expose the underlying drama and pathos of real-life crime scenes, Eugene Smith often skirted the line with images that were emotionally charged with his own empathy or anger, over and above their intrinsic content. Paul Strand, on the other hand, created "documentary" portraits, casting his images like movies on sets, overlaying his imagery with his armchair Marxist philosophy, and thereby crossing the line from reportage to propaganda.