



2010

Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy

Paul Messaris

University of Pennsylvania, pmessaris@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Messaris, P. (2010). Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy. *Journal of Communication*, 60 E1-E8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01476.x>

Messaris, P. (2010). "Visual Communication and Social Advocacy." *Journal of Communication*, 60(1): E1-E8. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01476.x

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/502

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments

Messaris, P. (2010). "Visual Communication and Social Advocacy." *Journal of Communication*, 60(1): E1-E8.
doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01476.x

Review Essay: Visual Communication and Social Advocacy

Filming difference: Actors, directors, producers, and writers on gender, race, and sexuality in film. By Daniel Bernardi (Ed.). University of Texas Press Austin, Texas, 2009 \$70.00 (hard), \$27.95 (paper), pp. 390

The other half: The life of Jacob Riis and the world of immigrant America. By Tom Buk-Swienty. Tr. Annette Buk-Swienty. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2008 \$27.95 (hard), pp. xvi + 331

Gay identity, new storytelling and the media. By Christopher Pullen. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, New York, 2009 \$90.00 (hard), pp. 280

Beautiful suffering: Photography and the traffic in pain. By Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, & Erinna Duganne (Eds.). Williams College Museum of Art, Williams-town, Massachusetts, 2007 \$25.00 (soft), pp. 216 illus

Daring to look: Dorothea Lange's photographs and reports from the field. By Anne Whiston Spirn. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 2008 \$40.00 (hard), pp. 359 illus

Almost three quarters of a century have gone by since the day in 1936 when Dorothea Lange, a photographer working for the U.S. Government, pulled off a California highway to take some pictures of a family that had fallen on hard times. One of the images that came out of Lange's photo shoot—a picture of a mother with three of her children—has attained enduring fame. To this day, the mother's beautiful but careworn features serve as a widely recognized visual symbol of the Great Depression. Indeed, the photograph's renown has greatly eclipsed that of its creator. In the introduction to her magnificent study of Lange, Anne Whiston Spirn tells us that, when people asked her what her new book was about, she had to invoke the photograph in order to explain who Lange had been.

One of the book's many virtues is its detailed description of how Dorothea Lange interacted with her subjects. Citing the testimony of people who had worked with Lange, as well as Lange's own words, Spirn emphasizes Lange's respect for the individuals she was photographing, and her ability to create rapport with them. According to Spirn, "There was no emotional distance between Lange and her subjects... she considered her subjects complicit in the creation of their own portraits" (p. 23). Spirn points out that many of Lange's pictures show people who are speaking to her as they are being photographed, and, as an emblematic illustration of Lange's approach, she reprints a pair of photographs (taken by one of Lange's assistants) in which Lange changes places with an agricultural worker (p. 24). Spirn sums up that approach by citing Lange's own words, as recorded by the photographer's assistant: "I never steal a photograph. Never. All photographs are made in collaboration, as part of their thinking as well as mine" (p. 23).

In view of all of the above, it may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that the subject of Lange's most famous photograph was actually very unhappy with the

photographer (p. 323). Interviewed as an older woman a few years before her 1983 death, Florence Thompson, the mother in Lange's picture, spoke bitterly about the experience of being photographed and its aftermath (Ganzel, 1984). What could account for such indifference or even hostility to the role that her image had played in the nation's "collective memory" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 62)? Thompson herself complained that Lange had failed to request her permission for the photographs and had not even asked what her name was. She also pointed out that the photographs had never brought her personally any monetary gain. It would seem, then, that in this case at least Lange's principles of mutuality and collaboration with her subjects must have suffered some kind of breakdown. However, it is worth considering another possible explanation for Florence Thompson's displeasure at her encounter with Lange—an explanation that would make sense even if Lange had scrupulously adhered to her stated rules about obtaining consent. To place this alternative possibility in context, it will be useful to take a detour through the work of two other photographers, Jacob Riis and Steve McCurry. (The latter is discussed in Reinhardt et al., 2007.)

During his lifetime, Jacob Riis (1849–1914) achieved considerable distinction as a social reformer concerned about the housing conditions of low income residents (mostly immigrants) in New York City. He was famous for his illustrated books, articles, and slide lectures about the lives of the urban poor. His 1890's best seller, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, is still in print, and has contributed to his posthumous reputation as a major pioneer in the use of photography for social causes. A new study of Riis's work, by Tom Buk-Swienty, provides a valuable reassessment of that reputation. Buk-Swienty, who lives in the same Danish town in which Riis had grown up before his 1870 migration to the United States, enriches our understanding of Riis's photographs by delving deeply into the history of his early years and by drawing extensively on Riis's diaries and other personal written records. Read in conjunction with a meticulously researched recent publication on Riis by Yochelson and Czitrom (2007), Buk-Swienty's book allows us to take a close, hard look at aspects of Riis's work that are somewhat unsettling.

During the past quarter century, critical commentary about Riis has often been negative (Twigg, 2008). As Yochelson and Czitrom point out, this reaction may have been triggered by renewed critical attention to Riis's written texts, which had previously been of little interest to the photographic community (p. xiii). Although Riis's writing conveys a sincere-sounding belief that poor people are the victims of their circumstances, it also contains many instances of racial/cultural stereotyping and coarse "ethnic humor." However, for someone concerned about the contemporary relevance of Riis's work, it is actually his photographs that are arguably more troubling. Reading Buk-Swienty's descriptions of Riis's photographic procedures and his analysis of how Riis felt about the circumstances he was documenting, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Riis was in certain respects the perpetrator of victimization, and not simply its chronicler. There are two reasons for this harsh judgment, one very obvious and the other somewhat more complicated. It is obvious, just by looking at the photographs themselves, that many of Riis's images were taken without their subjects' consent. In some pictures taken at night with the aid of the newly invented photographic flash, people huddling in miserable, overcrowded lodgings seem to

have been startled out of sleep by the cameraman. In this respect, Riis's photographs are early examples of a highly familiar problem in photojournalistic ethics—a problem that may have resurfaced in Dorothea Lange's encounter with Florence Thompson.

The more complicated problem with Riis's work has to do with his goals as a social reformer, and his attitude toward the lives of the people he was depicting in his photographs. This problem is highlighted in Riis's verbal comments about places that he calls "black and tan dives," that is, makeshift bars that sold cheap alcoholic drinks to a multiracial clientele. I have a vivid memory of the first time I saw one of Riis's "black and tan" pictures. Since the photograph was by Riis, I knew it was intended as an illustration of a social problem. But I could not figure out what that social problem was supposed to be. I remember wondering apprehensively whether the scene in the photograph—a black man surrounded by whites—was a prelude to some kind of racial confrontation. It turns out, though, that what Riis considered problematic was the mere fact that people of different backgrounds were mingling in such circumstances. In textual references that Buk-Swienty as well as Yochelson and Czitrom draw attention to, Riis speaks with evident loathing of cheap drinking establishments, and he gives an approving description of a thuggish police raid in which (for no specified reason) one of these places is shut down.

In other words, the kind of social "reform" that Riis seems to have favored in this case was certainly not something that his subjects themselves would have wanted. Moreover, his attitude in this specific instance is typical to a considerable extent of his more general approach to the social conditions he was documenting. In reading the passages that Buk-Swienty cites from Riis's work, one often gets the sense that he was personally offended by the living conditions of tenement dwellers and that his overriding goal was simply to remove the cause of that offense. In his own estimation, his major achievement was to convince the municipal authorities to condemn and demolish a cluster of particularly troublesome tenements— even though, as Buk-Swienty notes, this demolition took place without clear alternative housing plans for the people involved. To put it bluntly, then, however well-intentioned Riis may have been, he used his photographs to pursue goals that did not always match the aspirations of the people whose lives he was documenting. After we have taken a look at a second example of this type of problem, we will ask what relevance it may have to the encounter between Florence Thompson and Dorothea Lange.

The basis of *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* was a photographic exhibition of the same name, held at the Williams College Museum of Art in 2006. The exhibition's images, most of which had originated as documentary photographs, included scenes of warfare, famine, disease, and other forms of human misery. As its title indicates, the exhibition's organizing principle was the idea that artistic image making may be incompatible with the socially responsible and emotionally authentic representation of other people's pain. This principle is discussed in detail in the book, which consists of a series of scholarly essays in addition to reproductions of the exhibition's images. As Mark Reinhardt points out in one of the essays, many of these images can be seen as major aesthetic achievements—if viewed purely in terms of their formal qualities. For example, he focuses on a picture taken in 1993 by the photojournalist James Nachtwey. In Reinhardt's

own words, “The photograph seems framed to take maximum advantage of the crossing diagonals, the contrast of light and dark, the interplay between the texture of the skin and that of the coarse cloth wrapped. . . . around it” (p. 22). However, such artistry may appear somehow indecent when one considers the picture’s actual content: a Sudanese man suffering from extreme starvation, whose horrifically emaciated body is one of the most devastating images in this book.

The overall issue that is exemplified by this particular image is certainly not new (see Sontag, 2003). As Ann Pancake has argued in a discussion of images of environmental devastation, a simple way of resolving some of the contradictions posed by distressing images is to argue along the following lines: Although images that present “ghastly subject matter through beautiful form” may invite us to look more closely when what we really want is to turn away, form and content can be considered compatible if the former leads us to pay more attention to the latter, and to become better informed as a result of that enhanced scrutiny (Pancake, 2009, p. 60). The essays in *Beautiful Suffering* are more open-ended in their conclusions than Pancake is, although they certainly provide very thorough and nuanced explorations of this topic’s many ramifications. In particular, one of the essays explores a subject with several similarities to the case of Dorothea Lange’s photograph of Florence Thompson.

This essay, by Holly Edwards, focuses on a photograph of an Afghan girl taken in Pakistan in 1984 by U.S. *National Geographic* photographer Steve McCurry. At the time of the photograph, the girl was approximately 13 years old and living in a refugee camp, to which she and her surviving family members had fled after her parents had been killed during the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The girl’s image was published on the cover of the June 1985 *National Geographic*, and her striking features made the photograph famous. As in the case of Florence Thompson, the girl’s image was reproduced widely after its initial appearance, but the girl’s name—Sharbat Gula—did not become public knowledge until many years later. Moreover, there are questions as to how explicitly the girl may have consented to having her picture taken. Edwards notes that, while the photographer, Steve McCurry, recalls having received a verbal go-ahead, Sharbat Gula herself remembered being angry at him. He was a stranger. She had never been photographed before. “The picture was taken in a setting in which gender segregation was normative and image making was fraught” (p. 80). Indeed, as Edwards points out, another photograph that McCurry took of Sharbat that day shows her shielding her face with both her hands.

Despite the bad memories of her original encounter with photography, eighteen years later Sharbat Gula agreed to participate in a *National Geographic* video that was used as the springboard for a very successful fund-raising campaign on behalf of Afghan children’s education. In her discussion of this campaign, Edwards makes certain points whose relevance clearly extends well beyond this specific case. She points out that even though it may seem self-evident that education is a worthy goal, nonetheless it was a goal that was chosen by the campaign’s organizers, not by Sharbat Gula herself. Likewise, her unveiled appearance was also a choice made by others, even if that choice was made with her eventual consent. As Edwards argues, “beneath the good intentions, there may be problematical transactions between benefactor and beneficiary in which, for instance, the

charitable patron knows best what veiled women need, or the patron unilaterally overrides indigenous cultural norms to provide for those needs in the name of a greater good” (pp. 90–91). These observations echo the concerns that were raised in this review’s discussion of Jacob Riis. They may also provide a key to a fuller understanding of Florence Thompson’s objections to the way she was photographed by Dorothea Lange.

One of the distinctive features of Spirn’s book about Dorothea Lange is the fact that she devotes considerable space to the verbal descriptions and comments that Lange regularly added to her pictures. Intended in the first place for the government agencies to which she was reporting but also, eventually, for the broader public, Lange’s verbal statements were clearly meant to be integral components of her photographic work. As Spirn indicates, Lange paid amazingly close attention to the speech patterns of the people she was photographing, as well as to the specific details of their lives. When a mother with two children uses her wages from hop picking at the company-owned store, Lange notes that “She had earned 42 cents that morning. She spent it for: 1 lb. bologna sausage, 1 package ‘Sensation’ cigarettes, 1 ‘Mother’s Cake’” (Plate 84). When a migrant farm worker explains why he left Nebraska, Lange quotes his words as follows: “There’s more dogs in lots of counties of Nebraska than there is hogs. I’ll bet there isn’t a hundred hogs in Hamilton County. . . I’ve never asked for as much as a piece of bread, and I ain’t a-goin’ to” (p. 184).

These descriptions and captions are of great value in enhancing our understanding of what the people in the images were going through. But, somewhat paradoxically, very few of the comments tell us what those people thought the government should be doing. Although the man quoted above does complain about one of the government’s agencies, Spirn’s book as a whole contains remarkable little evidence of Lange asking her subjects for their opinions on the government’s activities— even though her own work was supposed to help government do a better job. In other words, it appears that here too, as in the case of Riis and McCurry, people were being photographed for their own good but without much say on what their own good should look like. It should not surprise us if some of Lange’s subjects, such as Florence Thompson, did not look back very favorably on the experience. As some members of Thompson’s family commented in later years, they did not appreciate being portrayed at a low point in their lives to serve a purpose that was not necessarily their own. In an interview that first appeared on NBC on October 30, 1979, Thompson’s daughter Ruby Sprague made it clear that to her what was important was Thompson’s strength and resilience during the Depression, not her temporary misfortune: “If she could have gave us all these material things, maybe she would have. But that don’t replace what she did give us. She gave us all a sense of worth that nobody owes us anything. We have pride you wouldn’t believe. Because of the idea of someone feeling sorry for us—*that we didn’t want*” (Interview with Florence Thompson, 1979).

The remaining two books on our list can be read as contrasting demonstrations of the points made above. In his timely and informative study of gay identity and media, Christopher Pullen looks at the activities of people who have worked within film, television, and online media to transform the representation of gays and lesbians. In contrast to the books we have reviewed so far, Pullen is concerned with narrative media (including fictional movies and video) more than with single images. More significantly, though, he is

concerned to a large extent with people whose visual advocacy is tied directly to their own identity—people who can be described as trying to change their own world, not someone else's. How do images produced under such circumstances differ from the pictures we have considered so far? Pullen's book is a series of detailed case studies, drawn from a variety of different media, different points in time, and even different cultures. To say that all these case studies exhibit one common feature would be to overgeneralize. Nevertheless, to this reader at least, there is a recurring characteristic that shows up in a remarkable variety of specific contexts: Even when facing considerable personal risk, the people in Pullen's case studies have tended to create images that emphasize personal and collective efficacy, as opposed to victimization.

Ironically, one of the book's best examples of this tendency is a British fiction film called *Victim*, which is described by Pullen as "a significant landmark in the visibility of gay men within the media" (p. 83). *Victim* was released theatrically in 1961. At that time, sex between men was still outlawed in the United Kingdom, and men who had engaged in same-sex relationships were therefore vulnerable not only to legal troubles but also to blackmail. The film centers on the activities of a blackmailing ring and its victims. However, the film's central character is not one of those victims. Instead, he is the one man who decides to defy the blackmailers, risking both his career and his marriage to bring them to justice. Moreover, as Pullen suggests, the film's theme is echoed by the personal bravery of the actor who played the central character (p. 88). Dirk Bogarde had been the UK's top movie star in terms of box-office receipts, and his success was based to a considerable extent on his performances in heterosexual romantic roles. Financially and professionally, he had much to lose by appearing in *Victim*.

Some of the most impressive case studies in Pullen's book come from his penultimate chapter, devoted to the representation of "sexual nonconformity within the developing world" (p. 197). Here Pullen discusses the actions of people, whose identities can expose them to the threat of substantial penalties, including death. For instance, he examines the case of an Egyptian school teacher who appeared in a documentary to describe his imprisonment on charges of "debauchery" (p. 197), as well as several examples of Iranians using media to build community in the wake of the public hanging of two young men who had been found guilty of "homosexual acts" (p. 221). Pullen also includes in this part of the book the case of Reinaldo Arenas, the openly gay Cuban poet whose brutal treatment by the Castro regime was portrayed after his death in the film *Before Night Falls* (pp. 207–212). In all these instances, what is striking is the degree of risk that photographic subjects are willing to take when they are being photographed for a cause that is their own.

As with most generalizations about human behavior, this review's emphasis on portraying one's own self and one's own cause is certainly liable to overstatement. This observation is prompted by the final book on our review list, Daniel Bernardi's *Filming Difference*, a collection of essays and interviews with actors, directors, producers, and writers. The book's unifying theme is the representation of identity. However, whereas some of the contributors are concerned with characters and stories that could be seen as broadly related to their own backgrounds, others discuss the intricacies of representing identities that are conceived as explicitly different from one's own. An outstanding example of the

former is filmmaker Aaron Greer's description of trying to create "a fairly unglamorous, realistic portrayal of a black child's life in a Midwestern city" (p. 209). Explaining how he was led to this project, Greer reminisces about the shock and frustration that he had felt when confronted with a driver's license application that demanded to know his race and gave him the following procrustean choices: Black, White, or Hispanic (p. 211). His film work since then has been a deliberate attempt to fight back against all the limitations that are placed on the representation of blackness on American screens: "no sex, nudity, on-screen violence, drugs, or gangs" . . . no "rappers, basketball stars, or, indeed, 'name talent' of any kind" (p. 211).

The second category of essay, concerned explicitly with bridging difference, is represented by several of the book's best chapters. A crucial theme of these chapters is expressed succinctly by Paris Barclay, a film and television director who is asked by an interviewer whether he feels that his own identity as an openly gay African American creates an obligation to represent race and gender in a socially conscious way. Barclay replies with an anecdote about a gay TV character whose background was so different from his own that he was prompted to ask the show's producer, "Do these people exist?" Nevertheless, as a director, he made sure the character's portrayal respected that difference: "virtually everything that this character said I disagreed with. I just wanted to make sure he came off as real as everyone around him" (p. 332).

Similar experiences are described by several of the book's other contributors, but this topic receives its most sustained treatment by Sheldon Schiffer, who conducts a systematic examination of the processes through which directors and actors prepare for the portrayal of roles that are "in some way different—ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, or sexually" from themselves (p. 223). In a way, this concern brings us back to an image that was described at the beginning of this review: Dorothea Lange exchanging places with one of her photographic subjects—the photographer taking the place of the person photographed. If, as in the case of Florence Thompson, Lange's efforts were not always successful in transcending difference, the likely fault was not in her intention, but in the institutional context within which she was operating. When photographs are taken in paternalistic contexts, when the subjects of photographs are portrayed as helpless supplicants for paternalistic causes, those subjects may end up being served less well than the causes.

Paul Messaris
University of Pennsylvania

References

Ganzel, B. (1984). *Dust bowl descent*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Hariman, R., & Lucaites, J. L. (2007). *No caption needed: Iconic photographs, public culture, and liberal democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Interview with Florence Thompson, the Mona Lisa of the dust bowl. (1979). Retrieved January 15, 2010, from <http://www.hulu.com/watch/71328/celebrating-mom-interview-withflorence-thompson-the-mona-lisa-ofthe-dust-bowl>

Pancake, A. (2009). A ruthless elegance: The obscene beauty of mountaintop removal. Photography by Richard Stevens. *Orion*, **28**, 56–61.

Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Picador.

Twigg, R. (2008). The performative dimension of surveillance: Jacob Riis's How the other half lives. In L. C. Olson, C. A. Finnegan, & D. S. Hope (Eds.), *Visual rhetoric: A reader in communication and American culture* (pp. 21–40). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yochelson, B., & Czitrom, D. (2007). *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure journalism and photography in turn-of-the-century New York*. New York: New Press.