

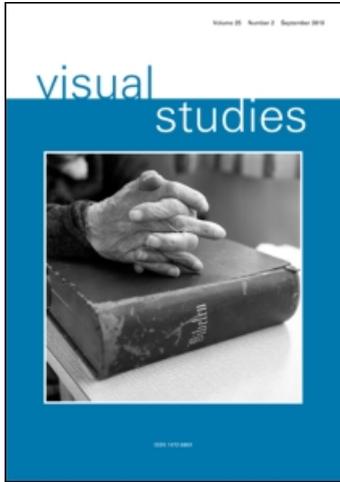
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Howard S. Becker^a

^a Professor of Sociology, University of Washington,

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Visual Sociology, Documentary Photography, and Photojournalism: It's (Almost) All a Matter of Context

Howard S. Becker

Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism are social constructions whose meaning arises in the contexts, organizational and historical, of different worlds of photographic work. Rereading photographs made in one genre as though they had been made in another illustrates this contextuality of meaning.

Three Kinds of Photography

People who want to use photographic materials for social science purposes—to do what is sometimes now called visual sociology—often get confused. The pictures visual sociologists make so resemble those made by others, who claim to be doing documentary photography or photojournalism, that they wonder whether they are doing anything distinctive. They try to clear up the confusion by looking for the essential differences, the defining features of each of the genres, as if it were just a matter of getting the definitions right.

Such labels do not refer to Platonic essences whose meaning we can discover by profound thought and analysis, but rather are just what people have found it useful to make them be. We can learn what people have been able to do using documentary photography or photojournalism as a cover, but we can't find out what the terms really mean. Their meaning arises in the organizations they are used in, out of the joint action of all the people involved in those organizations, and so varies from time to time and place to place. Just as paintings get their meaning in a world of painters, collectors, critics, and curators, so photographs get their meaning from the way the people involved with them understand them, use them, and thereby attribute meaning to them. (See H. Becker 1982)

Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism, then, are whatever they have come to mean, or been made to mean, in their daily use in worlds of photographic work. They are social constructions, pure and simple. In this they resemble all the other ways of reporting what we know, or think we have found out, about the societies we live in, such ways as ethnographic reports, statistical summaries, maps, and so on (H. Becker 1986). We can raise at least two kinds of questions about this activity of naming and attributing meaning.

Organizational

When people name classes of activity, as they have named these forms of picture-making, they are not just making things convenient for themselves and others by creating some shorthand tags. They almost always mean to accomplish other purposes as well: drawing boundaries around the activities, saying where they belong organizationally, establishing who is in charge, who is responsible for what, and who is entitled to what. A contemporary example can be taken from the field of drug use. Marijuana, cocaine, and heroin are drugs but alcohol and tobacco are—what? Recreational products? The terms do not reflect a chemical distinction based on the molecular structure of substances. They distinguish, rather, ways of treating substances, saying that one is to be banned and subjected, among other things, to Presidential disapproval while the other can be used for Presidential pleasure.

So we want to ask, of these different ways of talking about photography: Who is using these terms now? What are they trying to claim to locate that work in some work organization? Conversely, what kind of work and which people

do they mean to exclude? In short, what are they trying to accomplish by talking this way?

Historical

Where did these terms come from? What have they been used for in the past? How does their past use create a present context and how does that historically based context constrain what can be said and done now? "Documentary photography" was one kind of activity around the turn of the century, when great waves of social reform swept the United States and photographers had a ready audience for images exposing evil, and plenty of sponsors to pay them to create those images. "Visual sociology," if we can talk about such a thing in that era, consisted of much the same kind of images, but published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Neither term means now what it did then. The great social reform organizations have changed in character, their use of photographs subsidiary to a host of other techniques, and sociology has become more "scientific" and less open to reports in anything but words and numbers.

The three terms, then, have varying histories and present uses. Each is tied to and gets its meaning in a particular social context.

Photojournalism is what journalists do, producing images as part of the work of getting out daily newspapers and weekly news magazines (probably mostly daily newspapers now, since the death in the early nineteen-seventies of *Life* and *Look*). What is photojournalism commonly supposed to be? Unbiased. Factual. Complete. Attention-getting, storytelling, courageous. Our image of the photojournalist, insofar as it is based on historical figures, consists of one part Weegee, sleeping in his car, typing his stories on the typewriter stored in its trunk, smoking cigars, chasing car wrecks and fires, and photographing criminals for a New York tabloid; he said of his work "Murders and fires, my two best sellers, my bread and butter." A second part is Robert Capa, rushing into the midst of a war, a battle, to get a close-up shot of death and destruction (his watchword was "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough" (quoted in Capa 1968) for the news magazines. The final part of the stereotype is Margaret Bourke-White in aviator's gear, camera in one hand, helmet in the other, an

airplane wing and propeller behind her, flying around the world producing classic photo-essays in the *Life* style. Contemporary versions of the stereotype appear in Hollywood films: Nick Nolte, standing on the hood of a tank as it lumbers into battle through enemy fire, making images of war as he risks his life,

The reality is less heroic. Photojournalism is whatever it can be, given the nature of the journalism business. As that business changed, as the age of *Life* and *Look* faded, as the nature of the daily newspaper changed in the face of competition from radio and television, the photographs journalists made changed too. Photojournalism is no longer what it was in the days of Weegee or the first picture magazines in Germany (K. Becker 1985). Today's photojournalists are literate, college educated, can write, and so are no longer simply illustrators of stories reporters tell. They have a coherent ideology, based on the concept of the story-telling image. Nevertheless, contemporary photojournalism is, like its earlier versions, constrained by available space and by the prejudices, blind spots, and preconceived story lines of their editorial superiors (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987). Most importantly, readers do not expect to spend any time deciphering ambiguities and complexities in the photographs that appear in their daily newspaper or news magazine. Such photographs must, therefore, be instantly readable, immediately interpretable (Hagaman 1994, 1996).

Photojournalism is constrained, too, by the way editors hand out photographic assignments. Except for sports photographers, who sometimes become specialized in that area, photojournalists, unlike reporters, never develop a "beat," an area of the city's life they cover continuously and know so well that they develop a serious analysis and understanding of it. Since the photographs they make inevitably reflect their understanding of what they are photographing, that job-enforced ignorance means that the resulting images will almost necessarily reflect a superficial understanding of the events and social phenomena being photographed. Heroic legends describe the few photographers—Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson—who were brave enough or independent enough to overcome these obstacles. But the legends serve only to hearten those whose work still reflects those constraints. (A number of social

scientists have studied the organization of news gathering. See, for instance, Epstein 1973, Hall 1973, Molotch and Lester 1974, Schudson 1978, Tuchman 1978, and Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987. Hagaman 1996 gives a detailed account of the situation of newspaper photographers and of the constraints the job imposes on the pictures they make. See also Rudd 1995.)

Documentary photography was tied, historically, to both exploration and social reform. Some early documentarians worked, literally, "documenting" features of the natural landscape, as did Timothy O'Sullivan, who accompanied the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel in 1867-69 and the surveys of the southwestern United States led by Lieutenant George M. Wheeler, during which he made his now famous images of the Canyon de Chelle (Horan 1966, 151-214 and 237-312). Others documented unfamiliar ways of life, as in John Thompson's photographs of street life in London (Newhall 1964, 139), Eugène Atget's massive survey of Parisian people and places (Atget 1992), or August Sander's monumental study (finally published in English in 1986) of German social types. The latter two projects were, in fact, massive and monumental and in some deep sense impractical, that is, not tied to any immediate practical use.

Others worked, like Lewis Hine (Gutman 1967), for the great social surveys of the early part of the century or, like Jacob Riis 1971 [1901], for muckraking newspapers. Their work was used to expose evil and promote change. Their images were, perhaps, something like those journalists made but, less tied to illustrating a newspaper story, they had more space to breathe in. A classic example is Hine's image of "Leo, 48 inches high, 8 years old, picks up bobbins at fifteen cents a day," in which a young boy stands next to the machines which have, we almost surely conclude, stunted his growth.

What is documentary "supposed to do"? In the reformist version, it's supposed to dig deep, get at what Robert E. Park (a sociologist who had worked as a journalist for daily papers in Minneapolis, Denver, Detroit, Chicago and New York) called the Big News, be "concerned" about society, play an active role in social change, be socially responsible, worry about its effects on the society in which its work is distributed. Photogra-

phers like Hine saw their work, and it has often been seen since, as having an immediate effect on citizens and legislators. A photographically chauvinistic view of history often explains the passage of laws banning child labor as the direct result of Hines' work.

In its alternative version, documentary was not supposed to be anything in particular, since the work was not made for anyone in particular who could have enforced such requirements. Sander, who hoped to sell his work by subscription, described it variously as depicting the "existing social order" and "a physiognomical time exposure of German man" (Sander 1986, 23-4). Atget, rather more like an archetypal naive artist, did not describe his work at all, simply made it and sold the prints to whoever would buy them. Today, we see this work as having an exploratory, investigative character, something more like social science. Contemporary documentary photographers, whose work converges more consciously with social science, have become aware, as anthropologists have, that they have to worry about, and justify, their relations to the people they photograph.

Visual sociology has barely begun (but see the collection edited by Jon Wagner 1979, the thorough review by Chaplin 1994, and the publications of the International Visual Sociology Association). It is almost completely a creature of professional sociology, an academic discipline, and a poor relation of visual anthropology (Collier and Collier 1986), which has a somewhat cozier relation to its parent discipline; in the anthropological tradition, which required investigators going to far-off places to gather skulls and linguistic texts, and dig up archeological materials as well as gather conventional ethnographic materials, making photographs was just one more obligation of fieldwork. Since visual imagery has not been conventional in sociology since its beginnings, when it was more tied to social reform, most sociologists not only do not accept that obligation, they see few legitimate uses for visual materials, other than as "teaching aids." It is as though using photographs and films in a research report constituted pandering to the low tastes of the public or trying to persuade readers to accept shaky conclusions by using illegitimate, "rhetorical" means. In short, using visual materials seems "unscientific," probably because "science"

in sociology came to be defined as being objective and neutral, just the opposite of the crusading spirit which animated the early muckraking work, itself intimately tied to photography (Stasz 1979).

The definition of visual materials as unscientific is odd, since the natural sciences routinely use visual materials (see the discussion in Latour 1986). Contemporary biology, physics, and astronomy are unthinkable without photographic evidence. In social science, only history and anthropology, the least "scientific" disciplines, use photographs. Economics and political science, the most "scientific," don't. Sociology, trying to ape the supposed scientific character of the latter fields, doesn't. As a result, the few active visual sociologists are people who learned photography elsewhere and brought it to their academic work.

What is visual sociology "supposed to do?" We can answer that by saying what visual sociologists would have to do to compel the attention and respect of their discipline. What would they have to accomplish to convince other sociologists that their work is in some sense integral to the sociological enterprise? But it's not only a matter of convincing others. They must also convince themselves that what they are doing is "really sociology," not just making pretty or interesting pictures. To do that, they would have to show that their visual work furthers the enterprise of sociology, however the mission of the discipline is defined. Since sociologists differ on what sociology should be, the mission of visual sociology is similarly confused. At a minimum, it should help to answer questions raised in the discipline in a way acceptable to one or more disciplinary factions.

Better yet, it might add something that is now missing. Are there topics for which photography would be a particularly good research method? Douglas Harper, an important visual sociologist, suggests these possibilities: studies of interaction, the presentation of emotion, the use of photographs to elicit information in interviews, and studies of material culture (Harper 1988).

Having made these distinctions, it remains to say that the boundaries between them are increasingly blurred, as the situations in which people work and the purposes for which they make photographs increasingly blend two or more genres.

Context

Photographs get meanings, like all cultural objects, from their contexts. Even paintings or sculptures, which seem to exist in isolation, hanging on the wall of a museum, get their meaning from a context made up of what has been written about them, either in the label hanging beside them or elsewhere, other visual objects, physically present or just present in viewers' awareness, and from discussions going on around them and around the subject the works are about. If we think there is no context, that only means that the maker of the work has cleverly taken advantage of our willingness to provide the context for ourselves.

As opposed to much contemporary photography made in the name of art, the three photographic genres discussed here insist on giving a great deal of explicit social context for the photographs they present. (This is not the place to consider the fluidity of definitions of photographic art. But the last statement needs to be qualified to recognize that the art world has frequently incorporated into its photographic canon work made for reasons quite different from those of self-conscious art, including work made as journalism or documentary. The extreme case is Weegee, whose work now rests in many museum collections.) Contemporary art photographs (I'm thinking of the work of Nicholas Nixon as an example) often show us something that might well have been the subject of a documentary photograph (poor kids standing around a slummy street, for instance). But they seldom provide any more than the date and place of the photograph, withholding the minimal social data we ordinarily use to orient ourselves to others, leaving viewers to interpret the images as best they can from the clues of clothing, stance, demeanor and household furnishings they contain. What might seem to be artistic mystery is only ignorance created by the photographer's refusal to give us basic information (which, it is likely, the photographer doesn't have).

The genres we're considering—documentary, photojournalism, and visual sociology—routinely provide at least a minimally sufficient background to make the images intelligible. A classic example from visual anthropology is Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's *Balinese Character* (1942). Each

photograph is part of a two page layout, one page devoted to photographs, the other to two kinds of text: a one or two paragraph interpretive essay, describing a topic like "The Dragon and the Fear of Space" or "Boys' Tantrums" or "The Surface of the Body," these essays having a further context in a long introductory theoretical essay on culture and personality, and a full paragraph of annotation for each photograph, telling when it was made, who is in it, and what they are doing. (See the discussion in Hagaman 1995.)

Some works in the documentary tradition, often influenced by the photographer's exposure to social science, provide a great deal of text, sometimes in the words of the people involved (e.g., Danny Lyon's *Bikeriders* (1968) or Susan Meiselas' *Carnival Strippers* (1976) both done as independent projects). The text may be no more than an adequate caption, in the style of Lewis Hine or Dorothea Lange, or as in Jack Delano's portrait of a railroad worker, made in Chicago for the Farm Security Administration, whose caption reads, "Frank Williams, working on the car repair tracks at an Illinois Central Railroad yard. Mr. Williams has eight children, two of whom are in the U.S. Army. Chicago. November, 1942." (In Reid and Viskochil 1989, p. 192.) Photographic books often contain extensive introductions and essays setting the social and historical stage for the images.

But things aren't that simple: leaving the context implicit does not make a photograph art, while a full context makes it documentary, social science, or photojournalism. Not all good works of documentary provide this kind of context. Robert Frank's *The Americans* (to which I will devote more attention below) gives no more textual support to the images than most art photographs, but it is not vulnerable to the above criticism. Why not? Because the images themselves, sequenced, repetitive, variations on a set of themes, provide their own context, teach viewers what they need to know in order to arrive, by their own reasoning, at some conclusions about what they are looking at.

In short, context gives images meaning. If the work does not provide context in one of the ways I've just discussed, viewers will provide it, or not, from their own resources.

Let's pursue this line of thought by looking at images which exemplify each of the three genres

and seeing how they might be interpreted as one of the others. What if we take photographs of each type to be other than what they were made as—take a documentary photograph, for instance, as a news photograph or a work of visual sociology? What happens when we read these images in ways their makers didn't intend or, at least, differently than the way they are conventionally read?

Reading a documentary picture as visual sociology or photojournalism

In "En route from New York to Washington, Club Car" (Frank 1959, p. 25), three men sit in a railroad club car. Two large men sit with their backs to us, near enough to the camera to be slightly out of focus. They wear tweed jackets, have dark slick hair, lean toward each other, and occupy half the frame. Between them, in focus, we see a black-suited third man's bald head and, behind him, the bar, above which shine many small star-shaped lights. His face is jowly, his forehead lined. He isn't looking at either of the others. He seems serious, even somber.

Robert Frank made this picture, as he made all the pictures in *The Americans* with a documentary intent, as part of a larger project designed to describe American society.* Frank described that intent in his application for the Guggenheim fellowship that made the project possible:

What I have in mind, then, is observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere. Incidentally, it is fair to assume that when an observant American travels abroad his eye will see freshly; and that the reverse may be true when a European eye looks at the United States. I speak of the things that are there, anywhere and everywhere—easily found, not easily selected and interpreted. A small catalog comes to the mind's eye: a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns the three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house, the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur, advertising, neon lights, the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and backyards. . . (Tucker and Brookman 1986, p 20)

In another place, he explained his project this way:

With these photographs, I have attempted to show a cross-section of the American popula-

tion. My effort was to express it simply and without confusion. The view is personal and, therefore, various facets of American life and society have been ignored. . . .

I have been frequently accused of deliberately twisting subject matter to my point of view. Above all, I know that life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference. Opinion often consists of a kind of criticism. But criticism can come out of love. It is important to see what is invisible to others. Perhaps the look of hope or the look of sadness. Also, it is always the instantaneous reactions to oneself that produces a photograph. (Reprinted from *U.S. Camera Annual 1958*, U.S. Camera Publishing Corp., New York, 1967, p. 115, in Tucker and Brookman, p. 31)

Seen in this context, we can understand the image as a statement about American politics. These men (large, physically imposing) are the kind who occupy positions of political power, who inhabit such places as the club cars of trains going between New York, the country's financial center, and Washington, the center of political life. What makes this image documentary, and gives it its full meaning, is its context. The image says nothing explicit about American politics. But we understand its political statement by learning, from their use elsewhere in the book, the meaning of the image's details. We learn that a big man is a powerful man (as in Frank's "Bar—Gallup, New Mexico," in which a large man in jeans and a cowboy hat dominates a crowded bar), and that a well-dressed big man is a rich and powerful man ("Hotel lobby—Miami Beach," in which a large middle-aged man is accompanied by a woman wearing what seems to be an expensive fur). We learn that politicians are big, thus powerful, men ("City fathers—Hoboken, New Jersey," in which a group of such men fill a political platform). We see these big, well-dressed men on the train between these two power centers. The stars in the lights above the bar recall the American flags, and their use and misuse in political and everyday settings, in other photographs in the book, and suggest that we are looking at the powerful at work in some unspecified way, probably one that will not do us any good. The image functions as part of Frank's analysis—implicit, but nonetheless clear—of how the

American political system works.

If the analysis were made explicit, its complexity might well qualify it as a work of visual sociology. We would probably, in that case, want to know more about what we were seeing. Who are these people? What are they actually doing? But, more importantly, we would want to know more clearly what Frank was telling us about the nature of American politics. We would want to replace the nuance of the photographic treatment of American society, as many commentators have in fact done (cf. Brumfeld 1980; Cook 1982, 1986), with an explicit statement about the nature of that society, its class and political structure, its age grading, its sexual stratification, and its use of such major symbols as the flag, the cross, and the automobile. Such an explicit statement of cultural patterns and social structure would make the image speak to the kind of abstract questions about the organization of society that interest professional sociologists.

Even then, it's not likely that many sociologists would accept Frank's book as a work of scientific sociology. They would assume, correctly, that photographs are easily manipulated; the sophisticated ones would know that you need not alter the actual image, just frame the elements properly and wait for an opportune moment. They would worry, properly, about using one image as a surrogate for a larger universe of similar situations. They would not be sure, and have warrant for their uneasiness, that the images have the meaning I am imputing. They would not, however, take the next step, which would be to see that every form of social science data has exactly these problems, and that none of the commonly accepted and widely-used sociological methods solves them very well either.

Set on the front page of a daily newspaper, we might read the same photograph as a news photograph. But the people in it are not named, and newspapers seldom print photographs of anonymous people. Quite the contrary. Photojournalists are trained, until it is instinctive for them, to get names and other relevant information about the people they photograph (so a student in a course in photojournalism will be warned that a misspelled name will automatically lead to failure of the course). To function as a news photograph, the image would require a quite different caption than the one Frank gave it. For instance: "Senator John Jones of Rhode Island discusses campaign strategy

with two assistants.” But even then it’s unlikely that the picture would appear in the daily newspaper, because it is grainy, not in sharp focus, and the two staff aides have their backs to us. The editor would send the photographer back for a more sharply focused image of such a routine event, one that was less grainy and showed us the faces of all three men.

In fact, many conventional photographers and critics complained about Frank’s work in just the way this hypothetical editor would have. The editors of *Popular Photography*, for instance, didn’t like Frank’s book. These comments appeared in Vol. 46, no. 5 (May, 1960):

Frank has managed to express, through the recalcitrant medium of photography, an intense personal vision, and that’s nothing to carp at. But as to the nature of that vision I found its purity too often marred by spite, bitterness, and narrow prejudices just as so many of the prints are flawed by meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposure, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness. As a photographer, Frank shows contempt for any standards of quality or discipline in technique. . . . (Arthur Goldsmith, quoted in Tucker and Brookman, pp. 36-7).

And another critic said:

It seems as if he merely points the camera in the direction he wishes to shoot and doesn’t worry about exposure, composition, and lesser considerations. If you dig out-of-focus pictures, intense and unnecessary grain, converging verticals, a total absence of normal composition, and a relaxed, snapshot quality, then Robert Frank is for you. If you don’t, you may find *The Americans* one of the most irritating photo books to make the scene. (James M. Zanutto, quoted in Tucker and Brookman, p. 37)

If, however, a photojournalist had made the picture during an exposé of political corruption, an editor might well excuse such “technical” flaws because of the importance of what was revealed. In this case, the caption might read “James McGillicuddy, Boston political boss, talking with Senator John Jones of Rhode Island, Chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, and Harry Thompson, CEO of a major defense contracting firm.” The editor might make this the basis of a strong editorial and the Senator, like so many politicians accused of wrongdoing, might want to deny he was ever there.

In fact, at least one of Frank’s photographs (made at the 1956 Democratic convention) might well, in the proper context, have appeared in a

daily newspaper or news magazine as “news.” The caption (“Convention hall—Chicago”) characteristically names no one. Here we see the crowded floor of a political convention. Again, two men have their backs to us. On either side of them, two men face us. One, wearing dark glasses, looks suave and calm. The other, jowly, looks down worriedly. The faces of these two politicians were, at the time, recognizable, and their names might have given the picture “news value.” The troubled looking gentleman was a sociologist (from whom I took a class at the University of Chicago, which is why I recognized him) who had left academia for politics: Joseph Lohman, a well-known criminologist who became Illinois Secretary of State, made an unsuccessful try for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, and then left politics to become Dean of the School of Criminology at the University of California at Berkeley. At the time of the photograph he was still active in Illinois politics, seen as a “good government” type in the Adlai Stevenson tradition. He is talking, I believe (but am not sure), to Carmine DeSapio, a major New York City political figure, in the old-fashioned party boss tradition. In the context of that convention, the image of their conversation might, by indicating an unlikely and therefore interesting potential political alliance, have been “news”.

Reading a sociological picture as journalism and as documentary

Douglas Harper did his study of tramps as a work of sociology; the original dissertation relegated the photographs he had made to a “Volume 2,” where they had no captions. But the book he turned the thesis into, *Good Company* (1982), contained a large number of photographs, not as illustrations, the way photographs appear in sociology textbooks, but as elements integral to the sociological investigation and therefore to a reader’s sociological understanding. They contain, and express, ideas that are sociological in their origin and use, and thus may not be as transparent to an immediate reading as other photographs. For instance, the photograph of a man shaving needs to be seen in context, as Harper points out, as evidence that refutes the common notion that these men are bums who don’t take care of themselves and don’t share conventional standards of decorum. As he says, when we see these men with a two day growth of beard we should realize that that means that they shaved two days ago.

What makes these images visual sociology is not their content alone, but their context. They appear surrounded by a sociological text, although an unconventional one, which explains their import to us. One part of the text describes the way Carl, a tramp Harper met during his fieldwork, indoctrinated him into hobo culture. A second part describes, in analytic sociological language, that hobo culture, the characteristic forms of social organization hobos are involved in, and the conditions under which such adaptations grow up and persist. The text, both the narrative of Harper's training in how to live on the road and the later explicit sociological analysis, give the pictures added substance, sociological meaning, and evidentiary value.

Try reading these same images as photojournalism. Imagine them as illustrations for a newspaper's series on the fashionable topic of "homelessness." Read in that context, they would get their meaning, as photojournalistic images typically do, from the stock of easily available stereotypes daily newspaper readers carry with them. We probably would never see the man shaving because, for one thing, it's unlikely that any working photojournalist would want, or be able, to spend the months on the road that allowed Harper the ease of access and, more importantly, the background of knowledge that gave him the image's meaning. As famous a photojournalist as W. Eugene Smith, at the height of his career, still had to fight with *Life* repeatedly to get to spend as much as three weeks in one place.

In addition, an editor would probably say to the photographer who brought such pictures in, "These don't say 'homeless' to me." Why don't they? Because editors know, or think they know, in advance of any investigation, what their story line is going to be. Whatever a story says about "the problem" of homelessness will be well within what readers already know and believe. An appropriate photograph will rely, for its instant readability, on readers having that knowledge. For the editor, and therefore for the photographer, what "homelessness" is has already been decided; they are not trying to find things about it they didn't know before. The only problem is technical: how to get the image that tells the already selected story best. (See Hagaman 1996 and Rudd 1994).

Can we read Harper's photographs as documentary? Yes, we could see them, in Lewis Hine's classic phrase, as showing us what needs to be changed or, perhaps, the other half of Hine's famous remark, what needs to be appreciated. We might, in an appropriate setting of text and other photographs, see them as part of the effort of an aroused group of professionals to straighten out the lives of these men who wandered the country. Or we might, nearer to Harper's own intention, want to celebrate the independence and way of life of these men, in just the appreciative way David Matza (1969) described the Chicago School of sociology appreciating what was ordinarily condemned. This celebratory mode of reading shares much with the common anthropological injunction to respect the people you study.

Reading a journalistic picture as visual sociology and as documentary

Consider this picture.** We see a helicopter on a lawn, in the garden of what looks like the White House. A carpet runs from the building to the helicopter. A man, head down, shoulders hunched, walks along the carpet to the plane while, on either side, people stand weeping. People who were not old enough to be interested in politics in 1974 may not know what the image shows us, but it was then instantly recognizable to anyone reading the newspaper, anywhere in the world. Richard Nixon is leaving the White House, having just resigned the Presidency of the United States, his boast that he was not a crook belied by the continuing exposure of what he knew and when he knew it. In its day, it was a classic news photograph.

Shortly after its publication, it suffered the fate of all news photographs, which is that they are soon no longer news and have "only historical" value. Their news value depends on context, on the event being contemporary, "now." In fact, the pathos and emotional impact of the Nixon image required every viewer who picked up the paper and saw it to furnish that context, to know the second they saw the picture exactly what they were looking at. The image summed up a story they had followed for months in the papers and on television, the gradual and seemingly inevitable downfall of a powerful political leader, toppled by his own lies and paranoia, finally succumbing to a combination of political and journalistic attacks.

Years later the image has no such connotations. It records an event which people who did not read newspapers and magazines at the time have possibly read or heard about. But it is not news, not the end point of a story whose dénouement was, until then, unknown and in doubt. It has to be something other than news. What else could it be?

In the proper context, news photographs of continuing interest become documentary, as Erich Salomon's photographs, made between the two World Wars, of such phenomena as the Versailles Peace Conference, have become documentary (Salomon 1967). The politicians Salomon photographed—such luminaries of the time as Gustav Stresemann and Aristide Briand—are no longer news. But we might combine the Nixon image—no longer news to us—with Salomon's photographs to create a generalized document of aspects of the political process. Others, more historically minded, might like to see the Nixon image embedded in a larger consideration of the Watergate events.

Could the Nixon image be part of a sociological analysis? An analyst might be concerned, as many have been, with the way the print media deal with the generic phenomenon of political scandal (Molotch and Lester 1974), the way the devices of photographic representation are used to indicate the political downgrading of a disgraced leader. A good sociological analysis of this problem would require comparisons of photographs of Nixon at various stages of his career. Nixon would be an excellent subject for such an analysis because his career and reputation fluctuated so widely in such a relatively short time and the photographic representations could be expected to vary correspondingly.

Other analysts of political behavior might concern themselves with the public rituals of societies, with the use of quasi-regal paraphernalia and events to create a sort of monarchical regime within a political democracy. Photographs of Nixon, in such a research, would be surrounded by other photographs of similar rituals and by texts which revealed other devices aimed at the same result.

Summing up

Where does this leave us? Photographers worry about what they are doing, and hope to clear their

confusion up by finding the right name for what they do. But "word magic" is no more effective in solving photographic problems than it is anywhere else. Visual workers will find their legitimation in the response their work generates in viewers, whatever name that work goes by. They will find the direction for what they do in the particular circumstances of its doing, in the combination of organizations, audiences, and peers that surround them as they do the work.

For sociologists and other social scientists, these examples provide a warning against methodological purism, an illustration of the contextual nature of all efforts to understand social life. The same examples provide material for the continuing examination of ways of telling about society, whether through words, numbers, or pictures.

Notes

* Treating art photographs as social science has its own hazards. We were unable to procure permission from either Mr. Frank or his representative, Peter McGill of the Pace-McGill Gallery in New York, to reproduce any of the images I discuss here. I have tried to provide a description in the text that is sufficiently complete to allow readers to follow the analysis. It would be better, of course, to consult a copy of Frank's *The Americans* and have the image before you as you read.

** I have not been able to find the image I describe here, but have found others sufficiently similar as not to mar the argument. I've taken the liberty of describing the "perfect" image I remember.

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