

2005 MAASA Presidential Symposium

Cultural Studies, Visual Studies, Historical Studies: Connecting the Dots

Miles Orvell

How did it get started, this interest in photography—and visual culture more generally—within the framework of American studies? Where did it come from? I am tempted to say that it all began in 1934 with the publication of *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait*, edited by Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul Rosenfeld, and Harold Rugg. Stieglitz, who had made the argument himself for photography's parity with the other arts and who had devoted his life to promoting the medium as an art that would embody a democratic culture, was past the apogee of his influence but certainly ripe for celebration. The volume included essays by the five editors, themselves well known cultural figures, along with contributions by William Carlos Williams, Marsden Hartley, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and others; and the centrality of the idea of photography to the whole movement of modernism in the arts was the explicit theme of the collection. Photography was, as Paul Strand had said even in 1917, the "new God," and the camera would maintain its cultural dominance through the 1930s and beyond.¹

But if we are looking for the beginning of visual studies within the *academic* study of American culture, then we need to move to the end of the Thirties and the work of F. O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance* included discussions of painting to complement the more central discussions of literature. Later foundational works, like Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and Leo Marx's

Machine in the Garden, also included visual evidence from painting and graphic art to support thematic generalizations about American cultural history; so that we might say that American studies, rooted from its inception in literature and history, has often had as well an affinity for visual studies.²

But neither Matthiessen, nor Marx, nor Smith was particularly interested in photography. It was not until the 1970s, in fact, that photography began attracting interest within American studies, visible most notably in two books published in 1973—books that were in fact completely different from one another, save for their shared interest in photography. I'm thinking of Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* and of William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. In shifting interest to documentary studies, these works were both, I would argue, spinoffs of the radical culture of the Sixties, which, among academics at least, translated into an interest in radical history, including the periods of the 1890s and the 1930s. Lesy's book, striking a deep chord in a culture that was hungry to discover a lineage of insanity in middle America, was, shall we say, inventive in its use of photography from the late nineteenth century, but its sensationalism caught the general reader's imagination. Stott's much more sober study of the thirties usefully mapped the field and brought the whole mode of documentary into the mainstream of American studies, where it has remained ever since. Stott was interested in a range of documentary media, including film and radio—the study of which would also expand in later American studies—but it is photography that interests us here.³

Any account of the early interest in photography must include mention of two other seminal works of the late 1970s and early eighties, which brought considerable intellectual weight to the study of photography: one was Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (fueled in part by the notoriety of Diane Arbus during this period), which originally appeared as a series of essays in *The New York Review of Books* (1973 to 1977) and which raised questions about our media-saturated culture that would reverberate for many years. (I'll return to Sontag later.) The other was Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981), which opened up questions about photography and memory that would especially attract literary scholars, who would subsequently gravitate to issues of identity construction, autobiography, and the familial. By seeing photography as an integral part of the culture of modernity, Sontag and Barthes (and we should mention Walter Benjamin as well, of course), had made it an indispensable element of any interdisciplinary approach to cultural history.⁴

By the end of the 1980s, studies of documentary photography had taken a critical edge in influential works like Maren Stange's *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950*, which saw documentary photography as an essential part of the machinery of progressive reform; and James Curtis's *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, which took a close look at the practice of documentary, arguing, among other things, that Walker Evans posed his inanimate subjects—chairs, tables, brooms, and vases—as much as he did his human subjects. Emphasizing

the political and ideological dimensions of a medium whose objectivity might have been taken for granted by an earlier generation, both Stange and Curtis, though in different ways, were asking questions about photography's complicity in institutions that would continue to be asked by later scholars.⁵

American studies scholarship has been enormously enriched by this turn to the visual in the last twenty years or so, and I can't possibly, in the space I have here, do justice to the range of valuable work in the field. Omitting many important works and approaches, I will simply focus on three questions that, I believe, have dominated the study of photography of recent years:

1. *In the transaction between photographer and subject, how is the power of the camera exerted over the subject and what does this tell us about the taker of the picture?*

2. *In viewing photographic images, how does the context of display, whether exhibition or album or archive, determine the meaning of the image? More broadly, how does the circulation of images through society affect the "typicality" of the image?*

3. *Given the previous considerations, do photographs still (assuming they did once upon a time) tell us the truth of anything? Can we any longer take them as evidence of "reality"? Can they usefully construct our knowledge of the world?*

In structuring this talk in terms of these issues, I don't mean to imply that the issues are entirely separate, for in fact they are intertwined; but for the sake of making linear sense, of moving from point A to point Z, let me create this somewhat artificial set of distinctions.

1. *In the transaction between photographer and subject, how is the power of the camera exerted over the subject and what does this tell us about the taker of the picture?*

Any photograph is implicitly saying, "look at this! this is worth seeing!" and as such it implicitly expresses the subjectivity of the maker—the maker's gender, race, ethnicity, class—whose motivation may or may not be evident in the picture itself. To take gender, for example: is a camera in the hands of a man any different from a camera in the hands of a woman? How does gender construct the making of the photograph and the viewing of it? Let's begin with this issue, and with the broader question of whether the history of photography is any different in the hands of a man or a woman.

Yes, it is different, argues Judith Fryer Davidov in *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture*. Davidov establishes an alternate history of photography in opposition to the Stieglitz-dominated model (Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams), putting in place of the patriarch his friend (and later rival) the great teacher Clarence White, whose flexibility and accomodation to different modes of photography (from art to commercial) allowed for the greater development of his students and associates, who compose the main body of Davidov's interests. Davidov is also writing in opposition to Alan Trachtenberg's reading of American photography (while also acknowledging her debt to Trachtenberg), which tends to examine the masculine lineage.⁶

Examining such subjects as the Portrait; Pictorialism; Indians; African-Americans; Documentary; and Landscape, Davidov focuses on Anne Brigman, Imogen Cunningham, Laura Gilpin, Frances Benjamin Johnston, Consuela Kanaga, Gertrude Kasebier, Dorothea Lange, and Doris Ulmann, positioning many of them against a comparable male figure. Though she is not establishing any "essentialist" reading of female photography, nothing as stable as a female "vision," Davidov is asserting through her readings some definite attributes of the female photographic eye based on gendered differences that are cultural and biological—female anatomy relates to a vision of landscape and space; qualities of empathy relate to portrait modes; familial experience relates to the portrayal of others; and cultural stereotyping of femininity is a constant background against which these early twentieth century photographers work—through parody, subversion, etc.

Laura Wexler's *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, coming out a year after Davidov's work, covers two of these same figures—Kasebier and Johnston—along with Alice Austen and Jessie Tarbox Beals. Wexler's photographers, working around the turn of the century in the documentary mode, are professional photo-journalists in the service of the machinery of mass media, which is ultimately itself at the service of a prevailing and seemingly inescapable ideology of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism. In her virtuoso readings, Wexler teases out of these documentary images—out of the staging and positioning of the figures, the photographer's use of space, the glance of the eye, toward or away from the camera—a hidden narrative that she would have confirm her argument, that these women, though themselves struggling for recognition and success in a man's world, were unable to transcend their own privileged gaze and identification with authority.⁷

How the cultural "other" was seen thus tells us more about the picture-taker than about the subject of the picture. Kasebier, in Wexler's study, is a good example: the photographer bubbled with enthusiasm at the prospect of photographing some visiting Sioux Indian performers in New York, remembering them from her own childhood as a girl in Colorado. For one of her subjects—*Iron Tail*, who in profile would come to adorn our nickel—Kasebier attempted

to capture the “real” Indian underneath the plumage and headdress, which she proceeded to remove from his surprised body. Though submitting to the picture, Iron Tail ultimately would have none of it and ripped up the copy of the image she’d created of him shorn of his signifying paraphernalia. In fact, Iron Tail was being paid by Buffalo Bill to personify the “reality” of the Indian for a stage performance, and he was happy, soon after, to confirm his authenticity by having the picture re-taken in full regalia. For Wexler, it is ourselves, our desired image of the “other,” that is portrayed in Kasebier’s portrait.

But even Kasebier’s romantic Indian is a far cry from the utopian vision of Davidov’s Kanaga, who traveled to Paris in the late twenties and saw a society that seemed the antithesis of America:

The most beautiful white women are freely seen with Negroes. I believe it is wonderful. I am sick of seeing colored men and women abused by stupid white people. How terrible to be a Negro, to have no place, as the American Negro. . . . In Paris one day I saw the first Negro. . . . He was tall and beautiful and proud and there was none of the insolence, the aggressiveness of our Negroes in America. He was like a child who knows it is welcome and loved and I must admit to see his fine tranquil face was a great joy to me.⁸

Kanaga would try to capture some of that beauty, and some of that exotic quality in her own portraits of African Americans in subsequent years, but for all her good intentions she too could not escape turning them into types.

To put the question most generally, Can the act of photographing an “other” in any conceivable way fail to mirror the photographer himself (or herself)?

Leaving issues of gender to one side, Alan Trachtenberg’s own interest, in his most recent book—*Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930*—also involves the issue of power, concentrating more specifically on the visual construction of Indian and ethnic identity. Earlier, in *Reading American Photographs*, Trachtenberg had brought together the valuable work he had been doing for a decade or more—on Brady and Civil War photography; on the slave images of J. T. Zealy; on Lewis Hine—work that had exemplified the new complexity of photographic studies within an American studies context. In *Hiawatha*, Trachtenberg’s central problem is the means by which the nature of citizenship, of “Americanness” was defined during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by opposition to the foreignness of the Indian and the equal (and in some ways opposite) foreignness of the immigrant. But it is especially the Indian’s metamorphosis, from the race that is inevitably “vanishing” from the continent (sadness here was mixed with triumph) to the race that represents the First American, our collective ancestor, that *Hiawatha*

traces. Trachtenberg is not interested so much in the policies by which Indians and immigrants were defined as marginal or were melted into the assimilating pot of American identity, but in the way the cultural meaning of Indianness was enacted and performed, hence the importance of photography to his study. With chapters on Edward Curtis and on the Rodman Wanamaker Expeditions (the latter undertaken by Joseph Kossuth Dixon on behalf of the department store magnate and with the collusion of the U.S. government), Trachtenberg argues the centrality of photography to the way the Indian was constructed as an imaginary figure, a commodity that could be mourned and celebrated at the same time. However costumed and posed Curtis's Indians were (and here Trachtenberg draws on the earlier valuable studies of Curtis by Christopher Lyman and Mick Gidley), it's nice to know that even Curtis drew the line somewhere, as when he decried Dixon's similar work as "fakey imitations" of his own. Trachtenberg's methodology, which makes visual studies an integral part of historical studies, exemplifies the necessity of photography as part of a larger cultural discourse.⁹

Shawn Michelle Smith also explores how photography has served to define the lines of power in the United States, between a dominant white patriarchy and the cultural "others" who fall subject to the ruling gaze. In Smith's *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture*, issues of gender and race are the keys to understanding how cultural hegemony works. The middle-class vision established in the mid-nineteenth century and made visible in works like Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* establishes lineage or "blood" as a defining element of identity; as such, it supports the effort to place a boundary line between the races, and would indirectly support efforts later in the century by white supremacists to place black blood on the wrong side of the divide. But bring photography into the picture, and things immediately get more complicated, since not all "blacks" look "black." It is these complications of picturing, by both white and black photographers, that Smith explores in *American Archives*, with chapters on the convention of the "baby picture," on the competing notions of "likeness" and "type," on the stereotypes of the criminal as established in the visual iconography of the infamous Francis Galton, and on the photographs of the "American Negro" exhibited at the Paris Exposition of 1900.¹⁰

Let me expand on the last point: Two sets of images were shown in Paris—one created by Francis Johnston of the Hampton Institute, which, as Smith argues, were designed to show the erasure of African Americans and their docile domestication to the "national character" of white America. By contrast, the other set of images—three photographic albums featuring Georgia Negroes and containing 363 images—were created by W. E. B. Du Bois as a deliberate refutation of the racist stereotyping then widespread in the United States. Since there is little text to accompany the images, Smith reads them (astutely, I should say) against the prevailing visual stereotypes of black representation, which associated the Negro with the inferior racial stock that was judged "lower" on

the scale of civilization by a white supremacist culture that was getting its science lessons from the racist classification schemes of Francis Galton. Countering the mug shots and other de-humanizing genres of visualized race at the time, Du Bois commissioned a photographer to show the variety and individuality of African American personality and appearance, offering an image of bourgeois sufficiency and achieved civility as against the prevailing image of an impoverished and brutalized race. As Smith reads them, the Georgia albums, which won a gold prize at the Paris exposition, “recuperate a sense of racial autonomy and self-determination.” Smith’s discussion of Du Bois in *American Archives* is less than ten pages long, but clearly there was more to say, as she does in the recently published *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture*, which expands on the original argument, offering many more examples, a much larger cultural and scientific context, and some concrete information on the subjects and the maker of the images arranged by Du Bois. Let me add that a more formal and aesthetic presentation of these images, not referenced by Smith, is the 2003 volume, *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress*, with introductory essays by David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis; their volume amplifies the narrative of the circumstances surrounding the exhibition and has a more presentational purpose than Smith’s analytic study.¹¹

The narrative constructed by white scholars in recent years, dissecting the politics of image creation, confirms in detail what Frederick Douglass, remarkably prescient, said in 1849:

Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have developed a theory dissecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy.¹²

Happily we are beginning, but only just beginning, to get the African American perspective on African American photography, with Deborah Willis providing the foundation in a series of volumes, most notably her omnibus collection, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*. Gathering in this volume a set of nearly 600 images by a wide array of photographers, many of them unknown and many of them known (e.g. Augustus Washington, Roy De Carava, James VanDerZee, Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Clarissa Sligh), Willis provides a suggestive overview of how blacks have seen themselves, while opening many doors to further research. Yet what Robin D. G. Kelley says, in introducing the volume, is worth pondering: that black photographers were themselves not obsessed with race

and racism. “Although racism certainly circumscribed their lives, their interior world was far more meaningful to them than the rantings of a white-robed Grand Wizard or the invisible signs of Jim Crow.” In stressing that the record we see here is of the ordinary lives of people in communities, Kelley is making a point that is, perhaps, the obverse of the critical narrative that has otherwise occupied our attention—that the view from inside and the view from outside are two different views—the one from relative powerlessness, the other from a position of power and judgment. Nor does it negate the fact that it is whites who have been obsessed with race.¹³

Though Indian and African American representations have received the preponderance of attention regarding the issue of power and representation within American studies, broader issues of ethnographic representation have been on the table for some years now, emerging out of the visual anthropology movement in the 1980s and 1990s, in both England and the United States, and evidenced by the strong collection of essays brought together in the 1992 volume, *Anthropology and Photography*, edited by Elizabeth Edwards. During these same years, the influence of Dean MacCannell’s *The Tourist*, which first put tourism on the map, was joined by the nascent fields of performance studies and museum studies, most notably in the fascinating work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, whose *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* is an incisively analytic study of the ways cultural “difference” is physically embodied and staged. Both of these works stand behind a book like Jane Desmond’s *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*. Desmond’s *Staging Tourism* has several aims: it is partly an ethnography of Hawaii and partly a history of the touristic representation of the Hawaiian icon, the hula dancer; and it is also a comparative study of the touristic representation of animals—many of them outstanding performers—in captivity. Desmond too makes use of photographic representations, both historical and contemporary, in examining the way the “otherness” of the hula dancer is pictorially merged with the stereotypical attributes of the exotic, the feminine, the primitive. *Staging Tourism* elucidates the function of the “ethnographic gaze,” which confirms the identity and normative modernity of the viewer, in relation to the primitive “other.”¹⁴

2. *In viewing photographic images, how does the context of display, whether exhibition or album or archive, determine the meaning of the image? More broadly, how does the circulation of images through society affect the “typicality” of the image?*

How do we construe the meaning of a photograph? Obviously a photograph with a caption is offering us a decisive perspective on what the image might mean, though captions may tell only part of the story, or even a false story, about the image. How we make meaning out of an image is also, to a large degree, a function of *where* we see the picture. Meaning is, by this argument,

contextual: is the photograph found in an attic shoebox? A family album, neatly labeled? A newspaper or magazine story? An advertisement? An exhibition? An archive? Photographs, unlike most other cultural forms, can have many quite different meanings, depending on venue. The whole question of how images circulate in our society and how they consequently create the texture of our beliefs about the social world—is a relatively new one in photographic criticism, yet such studies of context, of audience, of the circulation of images in society, are more and more engaging our interest. They ask us to consider how pictures enter our world and construct that world. They ask us to consider the peculiar ontological status of photographs, by which the unique image becomes a “representative fact”—a type of reality, by virtue of how the image is exhibited.

Smith’s reading of Du Bois’ Georgia photographs in the context of their exhibition in Paris is one example, of course. An even earlier study of an exhibition—perhaps the most famous photographic exhibition ever—is Eric Sandeen’s *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*, which examines the famous 1955 Edward Steichen exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and its subsequent travels throughout the world as a pictorial ambassador of the United States and its values. American studies, picking up from museum studies and visual anthropology, is a natural space for such studies of exhibitions, and it’s surprising that there are not more such historical examinations.¹⁵

The photograph album, which has maintained its popularity as a domestic entertainment and memory archive from its mid-nineteenth-century beginnings until the present (allowing for its recent metamorphosis into the digital online album), is yet another area of potentially great interest to American studies that has received relatively little attention. Some work in this field has been done by Andrea L. Volpe, whose essay, “Collecting the Nation: Visions of Nationalism in Two Civil War-Era Photograph Albums” reads the arrangement of cartes de visite images in the photo album as a narrative of national sentiment. (This is work that complements, from a historical angle, some of the readings of family albums that visual anthropologists like Richard Chalfen have been doing for many years. See his 1987 *Snapshot Versions of Life*.) Smith and Volpe, Paula Rabinowitz, Wendy Kozol, and others are part of another new collection which, broadly speaking, looks at the circulation of images through American culture, and is titled *Looking for America*.¹⁶

Relatively more work has been done on the circulation of images in magazines and newspapers of the twentieth century. *Reading National Geographic*, by Jane L. Collins and Catherine A. Lutz, was a pioneering work in this regard, examining the production of visual narratives in that most venerable of picture magazines, from the editorial and creative perspectives as well as from the reader’s perspective. In gathering the exotic cultural “others” of the world for the armchair reader, *National Geographic* is, we might say, the agency of a kind of visual imperialism. Affirming the values of middlebrow culture, it sustains a norm of national identity amidst the flux of competing subcultures—

entertaining, informing, and comforting the reader—in much the same way that the Book of the Month Club has functioned over a similarly long cultural life, as Jan Radway has made clear in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire*.¹⁷

Yet another major creator of middle-class taste and culture was *Life* magazine, the subject in 1994 of Wendy Kozol's *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism*. Looking at a series of picture stories from the 1950s and 1960s, Kozol examined the way photographers and editors crafted an image of middle-class norms that codified and echoed the parallel world of television at the time, a world that essentially marginalized ethnic minorities and offered a vision of patriarchy and suburban materialism that would establish the American dream as a narcotic well worth pursuing.¹⁸

For the cultural historian, the moment when American civilization went pictorial, one might say, was the 1930s, with the advent of *Life* and *Look*, not to mention the creation of the massive photographic encyclopedia of America, the Farm Security Administration picture file. Not surprisingly, the thirties has not wanted for attention over the years, and I'll mention just two recent and significant works. One is Cara A. Finnegan's *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photography*, a less ambitious book than *Reading National Geographic* or *Life's America*, which nevertheless addresses an area of great importance and general neglect: the circulation of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs in the periodical literature of the 1930s. Considering *Survey Graphic*, *U.S. Camera*, and *Look* magazine, Finnegan explores three different rhetorical contexts for FSA photos, which were distributed gratis, as government productions, to the news media, provided they credited the U.S. agency. (Compare that to our contemporary practice, where the media are paid, usually under the table, to promote government policies, under the guise of independent journalism.) Finnegan highlights the differences among these various FSA venues: *Survey Graphic* incorporated the images into a social science narrative that promoted progressive change; *U.S. Camera* presented them as "fine" photographs, giving them respectful display amidst works by well known "art" photographers; and *Look* (a product of the enterprising Iowans, the Cowles brothers) took what it could get from Roy Stryker's FSA, cookie cutting the images into their own sensational layout, and serving them up on a platter of popular sentiment addressed to a mass audience.¹⁹

The most recent study of 1930s photography is John Raeburn's "*A Staggering Revolution*": *A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, which offers a subtle and complex analysis of production and reception. Beginning with the observation that our view of Thirties photography in America has been bound to the documentary movement, and especially to the FSA, Raeburn broadens that conception by incorporating figures like Berenice Abbott, Edward Weston, Bourke-White, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Edward Steichen, integrating them into a larger, more capacious picture of photographic

culture during the time. Raeburn's reading of the *Harlem Project* (Photo League) is especially significant, in drawing our attention to work that has been relatively neglected, as are his full-textured readings of the magazines, *U.S. Camera* and *Coronet*.²⁰

Raeburn is right to enlarge our view of Thirties photography, but let me return for a moment to the FSA, for one of its major accomplishments was the creation of a huge and monumental archive of pictures of the United States. And it was a function recognized at the time by FSA photographer John Vachon, among others, as of paramount importance, a cultural artifact of enormous significance. The FSA archive, qua archive, has been approached piece by piece, we might say, through studies that section it thematically one way or another (most often by locale), but few have attempted to see it whole.²¹

Apart from the FSA project, the idea of the archive was mapped theoretically in Allan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" and invoked handily in Smith's *American Archive*; but until recently it has been relatively neglected in visual studies. In a 2003 book, however, Paul Frosh places the archive at the center of a cultural study called, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography, and the Visual Content Industry*. Frosh is talking about the huge archives of pictures amalgamated by the giants of the industry, Getty Images and Corbis, so-called stock images that find their way into countless advertisements, promotional brochures, textbooks, greeting cards, not to mention the so-called "wallpaper" that decorates our video screens. While advertising, fueled by marketing interests, has been the subject of many textual studies and reception studies, little has been written about the industry of images—raw images—itself. Frosh aims simultaneously to "illuminate the production of photographic meaning and the meaning of photographic production" (8), as he puts it. Images find their way into the archive by deliberate invention, in obedience to the inevitable "focus group," or by virtue of their inclusion in some pre-existing archive; what matters is what Frosh calls their "theatrical value," and not at all their "truth value" as images (27). Whatever singularity an image may possess by virtue of its referential (or indexical) value is erased in favor of its representative quality as an example of this or that broader conceptual category. (W.J.T. Mitchell's work on the knotty relationships between words and images is especially useful to Frosh.)²²

3. *Given the previous considerations, do photographs still (assuming they did once upon a time) tell us the truth of anything? Can we any longer take them as evidence of "reality"? Can they usefully construct our knowledge of the world?*

Some images, surely, escape the archive by virtue of their irreducible uniqueness, their *not* fitting into a more general category. For example, consider the series of stills that comprise the Zapruder record of the Kennedy assassination,

which is the subject of David Lubin's 2003 book, *Shooting Kennedy, JFK and the Culture of Images*. Though ostensibly focused on a relatively small set of images that depict Kennedy, Lubin is in fact reading these images *through an archive*—the archive of visual images and icons that are part of the stored bank of pictures that form our visual and material culture. Being an art historian, Lubin has a somewhat privileged sense of that storehouse, but he encompasses not only high but also low culture, all part of the same visual warehouse that we inhabit when we are engaged in looking and remembering. Lubin's resulting book is a kind of ethnography of American life and sensibility in the fifties and sixties, gathering together the facets of film noir, of television, of *Life* and *Look*, of politics, streamline design, fashion, sexual mores, photo-ops, the lives of the rich and famous Kennedys and the lives of the momentous losers, Oswald and Ruby. Lubin's readings make no attempt to get to the heart of the "reality" of what happened in Dallas. They are deliberately not normative. Instead, they play at the edges of reception study, suggesting a vast set of associations, both appropriate and "inappropriate," that might govern our response to the famous Kennedy icons.²³

And yet, leaving Lubin aside, the nagging questions of the Zapruder images remain: Can we ever get to the reality of what actually happened? And what do we mean by "what happened"? Do we mean that Kennedy was shot? (no dispute there). Or do we mean that someone—Oswald alone? Oswald and others?—shot him? Can photographs tell us the truth? Can we use them to construct our knowledge of what is outside the self, our social knowledge? If I started this examination of contemporary photographic studies with the proposition that photographs create and perpetuate stereotypes, that they reveal the maker rather than the subject, I want to turn that proposition on its head now and consider the degree to which photography does claim our attention as a revelation of reality, a contention that bridges the theory of photography and the ethics of looking.

The ontology of the photographic image is, in fact, a subject that has attracted the interest of philosophers and theorists from Oliver Wendell Holmes (as a phenomenologist, one might say) to Walter Benjamin and Andre Bazin and down to our own time. What is distinctive about the photographic image, all have argued, is its seemingly special relationship to "reality," its so-called "indexical" quality, based on the fact that any photograph begins, at least, with what is "out there," outside the camera.

Yet the supposed indexical quality of photography has been challenged from several angles in recent years: If photographic images have this special indexical relationship to reality, they are equally distinctive, as Barbara E. Savedoff argues in *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture*, in defamiliarizing the object, producing an estrangement from "reality" through manipulation of the picture space. Patrick Maynard, in *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography* comes at the uniqueness of photography from another angle, considering it as a technology of seeing, an "engine of visualization" that—like all technologies—is based on a combination

of amplification (e.g. a close-up) and suppression (e.g. filtering of color or other information). And what about digital photography? The technology of the medium is investigated most richly in the earliest of these books, Fred Ritchin's *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography*, which anticipates the most salient issues that have evolved since its publication in 1990, an early moment in a process that has continued unceasingly, the digitalization of photography, a process that seems on the surface at least to undermine whatever claim to faithful representation photography might originally have maintained.²⁴

Of course we accept manipulation in an aesthetic medium, and to the extent that we view photography aesthetically, manipulation and distortion are what we are interested in. But does this acceptance of manipulation utterly negate the *evidentiary* character of photography? What is the nature of documentary looking? These questions are explored in an invaluable collection of essays on photography, documentary cinema, and reality television, *Collecting Visible Evidence*, edited by Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov. The editors define our viewing of documentary as an oscillation between what they call "epistephilia"—our fascination with reality, the more catastrophic the better—and the impulsion to act that can also result from the shocking revelation of injustice that is the common goal of documentary.²⁵

Few images are more shocking, few contain more visible evidence indicting the injustice of our society, than the hundreds of photographs made to commemorate lynchings (most, but not all of them, taking place in the Southern states), which date from the 1880s through the 1940s. Such images, circulated initially as postcard souvenirs, were exhibited in 2000 in a New York gallery (and several subsequent venues) as *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen*; 98 images from the collection were published (along with several essays) in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. That lynching photographs found their way into galleries and museums might suggest that they had been safely transmuted into "art history," but the matter is of course considerably more complicated than that. The distance afforded by the aesthetic frame does not extinguish the maddening power of these images, and the debate they have occasioned as to their evolving cultural meanings continues to go on. (See Dora Apel's *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*.) These images seem to have an irreducible quality of factuality—here is a lynching in all its mutilating horror—but ambiguities remain in our understanding of the mobs pictured beneath the hanging figures in complacency and pride. Are the sometimes smiling, sometimes somber, proud white people in these images, who are at times clutching their souvenirs of clothing or hair or flesh, aware of the self-indicting nature of this photographic evidence? Are these people living in a moral universe with its own laws? What is more, the lynching images pose a challenge to the white American viewer that is unique: this is not some remote barbaric culture, this is the United States of America, home of the brave. So what is the look of madness in the eyes of these lynchers all about?²⁶

Yet another body of shocking evidentiary imagery produced in the twentieth century is the photographs of the Nazi concentration camps, taken upon their liberation in 1945, and these have been the subject of many studies by American scholars, including Barbie Zelizer's *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*. Zelizer traces the stages of awareness, and forgetting, that have been promoted by photography of the holocaust, from the first pictures taken by cameramen coming upon the concentration camps at the war's end to their early publication, the shock and incredulity they evoked in some, and in others, the denial of what they portrayed. Such images operate at the limits of documentary representation, yet at the same time they may force us to consider the degree to which they function at all because of aesthetic considerations. One photographer quoted by Zelizer remembers shooting frantically, yet also at some point "subconsciously arranging groups and bodies on the ground into artistic compositions in his viewfinder." He is shocked and disgusted at his own reaction (88).²⁷

Yet the problem for the viewer of such Holocaust imagery is a problem of comprehension, of coming to terms with a horror so great it threatens our understanding of civilization. At the same time, it doesn't seem at first to be "our" problem; it seems to stand against all that we think of as "American" values. The Nazi camp photos, we must remember, were first seen at a moment in our history when the reality of World War II was shrouded from the general public. Images of dead soldiers, of the seriously wounded, of psychiatric casualties, of the casual atrocities committed by American soldiers in World War II—such images of the brutality of war were censored by the U.S. government and so did not seriously impair a sense of reality based on Hollywood war movies. As George H. Roeder, Jr., argues in "Censoring Disorder: American Visual Imagery of World War II," written in the early 1990s, "Withholding evidence of atrocities committed by American soldiers encouraged excessive confidence in the rectitude of American goals and tactics in cold war conflicts, including early phases of the war in Vietnam" (63). A similar logic of censorship was at work in the first Gulf War as well, when—following the over-exposure of atrocities in the latter years of the Vietnam War—the U.S. government decided to keep violence at a considerable distance, filtered through the video screens of bombers high above the field of battle, where the destruction of human life was invisible. Photography was nowhere in that first Bush war; instead it was all on the TV screen in an aesthetic that, as Andrew Ross suggests, resembled a Nintendo game, the culmination of "the military-industrial-media complex, concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer conglomerate owners."²⁸

President George W. Bush, with his more immediate sense of theater, realized that a new Gulf War called for new tactics and new theatrics. If we were living in an age of Reality TV, then let's turn the war into one big Reality TV program, with so called "embedded" reporters serving as the cameramen, our surrogate witnesses to a battle that couldn't have gone more decisively to the swift and the strong. What came after—the Abu Ghraib prison photographs that crept into the

media irrepressibly from the ubiquitous digital camera—was of course another story altogether.

The effect on the viewer of the horror photos of war—from the Civil War battlefield, shot in stereographic vision, to the Nazi concentration camps, to My Lai, to Abu Ghraib—has not been studied in any empirical way, but it has been theorized most famously by Susan Sontag. In *On Photography*, published in the 1970s, Sontag had argued that images of horror and atrocity, saturating our consciousness, leave us finally deadened to the effects of photographic revelation. When Sontag came to reconsider this whole matter (and the lynching photos seem to have been one of the catalysts for this reconsideration), in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she revised her views considerably. “Shock can wear off,” Sontag observes, yet certain key photographs of atrocity (whether Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Rwanda, or the American South) are indelible and retain their effect as symbols, as totems, as collective memories. Taking a stand against the cynicism of de Bord and Bourdieu, who had defined for a generation our media society as one in which the unreality of the spectacle has overwhelmed reality, Sontag insisted, in her last book, that human cruelty was inescapable and universal and that photography could function, benignly and efficaciously, as an “invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers” (117).²⁹

Despite our digital overload, the Abu Ghraib photographs have shown yet again the evidentiary capacity of the image. (Evidence provided by digital cameras, it must be emphasized.) Despite the contention of some viewers that the images were faked, it is accepted (even by the U.S. government) that these events took place. Whether they are “abuse” or “torture” is what is debated, and much is at stake in how you see and respond to these images. We have not begun to take account of them fully, but that is doubtless on the agenda (as it is, in fact, on my own agenda, in a projected future study), as is the issue of how we respond complexly to such images—viewing them—especially when they are moved from the newspaper to the museum wall—as documents that exist in some space between the moral and the aesthetic.³⁰

Two points remain to be reiterated: first, the incontrovertible power of the photographic image—as an object that creates identity and creates stereotypes; and, second, its baffling complexity, as a representation that is both factual and artistic, a document that is open to a range of contested meanings. These qualities of photography compel us to connect the dots between the visual, the historical, and the cultural, drawing us to the further exploration of visual culture within American studies and promising to keep us moving in that direction for some time.

Notes

1. Waldo Frank, et. al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1934).

2. F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford, 1941); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as*

Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

3. Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (New York: Pantheon, 1973); Stott, *Documenting Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

5. Maren Strange, *Symbols of Ideal Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

6. Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

7. Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

8. Davidov, *Women's Camera Work*, 199.

9. Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004); Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

10. Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

11. *Ibid.*; Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis, eds., *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Dubois and African American Portraits of Progress* (New York: Amistad, 2003).

12. "A Tribute to the Negro," *The North Star*, April 7, 1849, quoted in Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2000), xvii.

13. Robin D. G. Kelley, "Foreword," in Willis, *Reflections in Black*, x.

14. Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jane Desmond, *Staging Tourism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

15. Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*; Eric Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

16. Andrea L. Volpe, "Collecting the Nation," in *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America*, ed. Leah Dilworth (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 89-111; Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987); Ardis Cameron, *Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

17. Jane L. Collins and Catherine A. Lutz, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Janice A. Radway, *Feeling for Books* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

18. Wendy Kozol, *Life's America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

19. Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003).

20. John Raeburn, "A Staggering Revolution" (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

21. John Vachon, "Standards of the Documentary File," in *John Vachon's America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II*, ed. Miles Orvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 282-85; Alan Trachtenberg wrote a valuable essay on the concept of the archive, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

22. Allen Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64; Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory* (London and New York: Berg, 2003); see for example, W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

23. David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

24. Barbara E. Savedoff, *Transforming Images* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography: How Computer Technology is Changing Our View of the World* (New York: Aperture, 1990; 2nd ed., 1999).

25. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

26. James Allen, *Without Sanctuary* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000). Includes essays by John Lewis, Leon Litwack, and Hilton Als; Apel, *Imagery of Lynching* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

27. Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
28. George H. Roeder, Jr., "Censoring Disorder," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II*, eds. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 46-70; Andrew Ross, "The Ecology of Images," in *Eloquent Obsessions: Writing Cultural Criticism*, ed. Marianne Torgovnick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 185; see also, David D. Perlmutter, *Visions of War: Picturing Warfare from the Stone Age to the Cyber Age* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), especially chapter 7, "Living Room Wars."
29. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003).
30. See Miles Orvell, "After 9/11: Photography, the Destructive Sublime, and the Postmodern Archive," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 45 (Spring 2006), 238-56.