

Assignment 4 A Critical Review of Dorothea Lange's work for the FSA.

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Looking at "Towards Los Angeles" (Lange, 1937) has taken me on a journey. This journey had a starting point just enjoying Dorothea Lange's photograph. Stops along the way included finding out about the New Deal (Peter Walther, 2010), Roy Stryker and his methods of work. Jack Delano writes "Through these travels and the photographs I got to love the United States more than I could have in any other way" (Delano, 1942). My journey ends with an understanding of the catalyst that created this body of work.

I chose to review this photograph partly because it doesn't show female subjects in matriarchal role, a role Dorothea Lange was unfairly called the "Mother" of the group. Dorothea Lange was given this "title" as she showed mothers in a lot of her photographs. I disagree she showed strong female icons who were struggling to hold together their families. ~~Take~~ Florence Owens Thompson the lady in primary subject in "Migrant Mother", ~~this lady~~ had just sold her tires from her car to put food on her children's table. This was a lady doing whatever to keep her family intact and to my interpretation the use of 'mother' is intended to reduce and oversimplify the importance of her role.

Looking at "Towards Los Angeles" I see two men travelling along a dusty road past a billboard which shows the advertising slogan "Next time try the train.....Relax" (Southern Pacific, 1938). Both men look like they couldn't afford to take the train. They are walking a dusty road Highway 99 through a dark verge and a line of telegraph poles which form nice leading lines emphasising the distance travelled and the way to go to reach their destination. They are carrying their luggage in their by hand and on the shoulder. Both wear hats shielding them from the sun hinted at with brown necks. The boot of the man on the right is raised making me feel it is a "decisive moment" in the style of Henri Cartier Bresson. Neither of the men appears to be taking any notice of the billboard the punch line of the photograph. The more I look at this photograph the more I wonder if it was staged.

Why Billboard? In February 1936 Walker Evans had taken "Framed houses and a billboard" (Evans 1936) followed a year later by Edwin Locke who took "Road sign near Kingwood, West Virginia", (Locke, 1937). Both striking photographs but neither has any people in the frame.

Twelve months after Locke took "Road Sign near Kingwood" Margaret Bourke-White was in Kentucky not part of the FSA project. She saw a line of people who had been displaced by a flood in Kentucky they were queuing underneath a billboard she created "Kentucky Flood", the billboard shows an all American white family with the slogan "Worlds Highest Standard of Living" then a second line stating "there's no way like the American Way" (Bourke-White, 1937) a truly powerful image as it includes black people, waiting in line for relief from hunger. At the same time Dorothea Lange had been sent to document the people and living conditions along Route 99 in California.

Dorothea Lange now on Route 99 must have been aware of these photographs as she worked with and was friends with Evans and Locke, Life magazine published "Kentucky Flood". Around this time she took several shots showing billboards in the landscape but then she made several shots of Pea Pickers using

Commented [DW1]: I'm not quite sure which bit this reference refers to as you don't need a ref for the New Deal, but if this is a source of additional information about New Deal then perhaps a footnote would be cleaner. Another option would be a reference after 'his methods of work', ideally at least three separate sources.

Commented [DW2]: Needs a slight rephrase

Commented [DW3]: I would be careful about misuse of speech marks. You don't need 'title' in inverted commas here.

Commented [DW4]: You will need to check but I'm not convinced a reference for text that lies within an image is necessary.

Commented [DW5]: 'nice' isn't a critical analysis term

Commented [DW6]: This would be an ideal place to include the image

Commented [DW7]: Possibly a reference to a wider discussion of the importance of foot position in the decisive moment or, possibly more easily, a footnote that argues, very briefly, that the action of stepping is vital to the decisive moment as seen in Bresson's 'Behind the Gare St. Lazare'.

Commented [DW8]: This paragraph stands out as not really doing anything useful. You need to either deepen the argument here to make it a full paragraph or work it into an existing one.

Commented [DW9]: After what?

Commented [DW10]: Grammar or missing word

Commented [DW11]: This sentence should be at the beginning of the next paragraph. This paragraph needs to end with a conclusion about Bourke-White's Kentucky work. Why is it powerful? What is it adding or contrasting with the FSA work of Lange above?

Commented [DW12]: 'It is my interpretation that Dorothea Lange must have been aware...'

bill boards as shelter. She made "Dispossessed" (Lange, 1937). This photo is less tidy and to me looks like it is a "true" record of what she saw. This photo is part of a series of six showing how the three families used the billboard for shelter.

Commented [DW13]: Does this add to or detract from your argument?

A little later in the day she made "Towards Los Angeles". The Billboards in all these exposure are for Southern Pacific Railway but all have different pictures and slogans. None would have been suitable for the two walkers shown in "Towards Los Angeles" as they all had too much of the clutter of life around the billboard.

Researching this photo took me to the Farm Security Administration. This organisation was formed as part of President Franklin Dwight Roosevelt's, New Deal. The organisation was tasked with recording the plight of the agricultural population of the United States. Roy Stryker was employed to head the documentary department.

Roy Stryker was an academic specialising in economics. He applied his academic knowledge to his given task. However he realised that photographers with an artistic background would help him gather the images needed to support the written word. He was a firm believer that photographs supported written words and was only part of the truth to be shown. He said "Our editors, I'm afraid, have come to believe that the photograph is an end in itself. They've forgotten that the photograph is only the subsidiary, the little brother, of the word" (Stryker, 1936).

Commented [DW14]: Change font to match paper

Never end a paragraph on a quotation – you have to use the quote to build your argument so, once used, state why it is important or what you are proving with it.

He had served in the military in the infantry during World War One. This would have given him self discipline and could have been a part of creating his over bearing reputation. In 1964, Lange herself described his working practices thus, "That freedom that there was where you found your own way, without criticism from anyone, was special. That was germane to that project. That's the thing that is almost impossible to duplicate or find. Roy Stryker...had an instinct for what's important. Its instinct. And he is a colossal watchdog for his people. If you were on the staff, you were one of his people, and he was a watchdog, and a good one" (Lange, 1964).

Much of the work I researched spoke about Stryker being a micro manager, who told his team of photographers what to read, where to go, the things to shoot and how to show them. I then found some examples of Stryker and his assistants taking a hole punch to exposures that they felt didn't meet the brief. I found this shocking. In completing my research I found letters from Stryker (Library of Congress, Various dates) in which he talks about the cost of setting up shoots and questions such small amounts as \$5 for travel. He was in control of ~~a~~every detail of his brief, supervising all parts of the work his team produced.

Commented [DW15]: Insert references of this reading here

In an interview in 1997, Naomi Rosenblum described the FSA process "In common with other government agencies that embraced photographic projects, the FSA supplied prints for reproduction in the daily and periodical press. In that project photographers were given shooting scripts from which to work, did not own the negatives, and had no control over how the pictures might be cropped, arranged and captioned. There position was similar to that of photojournalists working for the commercial press – a situation that Evans and Lange found particularly distasteful" (Rosenblum, 1997 336-9).

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~~He~~ Stryker frowned on manipulation of images, evidenced by his reaction. ~~W~~hen Dorothea Lange removed a floating thumb from "Migrant Mother" (Lange, 1937), ~~h~~He was less than pleased and admonished her for doing so. However at this time many famous photographs were manipulated Josef Stalin had Nikolai Yezhov removed from a photograph taken at Moscow Canal (Getty Images, 1934) and Frank Hurley photographer on the Shackleton expedition removed a second boat from the famous "Rescue by the Yelco" (Hurley, 1916) a photograph taken at Point Wild South Georgia he simply scratched the second boat out of the negative. So manipulation was employed long before photoshop (Adobe, 1991).

All of this control begs the question did he trust his team of highly experienced photographers to deliver the exposures he needed to complete his brief?

The FSA produced 164,000 monochrome negatives of which 77,000 were made into finished prints (Library of Congress, 2012). 664 colour prints were produced from 1600c negatives were also produced. They featured in the press and in magazines making the cover of Time and Life magazine to show the suffering to all the people of the USA. They created a picture of the Great Depression and triggered many social changes in both housing and working conditions across the states.

Roy Stryker receives a lot of criticism but I see a man who was educated, focused and understood his brief totally. He also understood he needed to direct his team who were working remotely with little supervision. We live and work in an environment utilizing the internet to give us almost instant reaction to our work. Think of sports photographers they send photos from the stadia they work in to their office, getting the image into print or online in seconds. Stryker's team had to post film into their office which could take days to reach Washington. Then the images were processed and a contact sheet would be returned to the practitioner for them to caption and return. This process would take at least fourteen days. Stryker would need to micromanage this to keep it under control.

In the letters I found (Library of Congress, 2012) Stryker admonishes the photographer for duplicating the same image five times. These negatives would need to be destroyed to save filing space. He also made decisions about exposures whether they were in focus and whether they fit the Government's brief to the FSA. With 77,000 images this would need to be kept tight so some control could be kept in the work process. I think of my digital library and the issues I experience keeping it clearly catalogued.

Commented [DW17]: Sloppy language. Consider rephrasing

All of this control begs the question did he trust his team of highly experienced photographers to deliver the exposures he needed to complete his brief?

Did he trust his photographers? I think he did based on the letters I found he had a tight rein on the shots he wanted from the photographer who has just started working with the FSA and he gives a free rein to the local organisation to create an itinerary of shots with Dorothea Lange. If she had been given a strict set of instructions I feel she wouldn't have produced "Towards Los Angeles".

Commented [DW18]: From who and to who? Referecne?

~~He~~ Stryker adapted his approach as the FSA progressed. Early in the project, he destroyed images with a hole punch. ~~h~~However, he listened to concerns of the photographers and stopped this later in the programme. Most of the photographers had protested against the destruction of their images. Evans

and Lange were vociferous from the start about this issue. Ben Shahn said, "Roy was a little bit dictatorial in his editing and he ruined quite a number of my pictures, which he stopped doing later. He used to punch a hole through a negative. Some of them were incredibly valuable" (Arbuckle, 2009).

Commented [DW19]: Who? Add a brief, say two or three word, intro

Commented [DW20]: Again, don't end on a quote. Your job here is to use the quotes to form an argument, which is your analysis of the quotes to build up your wider thesis

Commented [DW21]: Was to be or was?

In 1942 at the height of the Second World War the FSA was to be incorporated into the Office of War Information. Stryker employed Paul Vanderbilt to catalogue, improve and simplify access to these images. They arranged for the images to enter the Library of Congress, Vanderbilt went with them and continued his cataloguing work. Many would have just walked away job done, Stryker worked to ensure the collection not only was secured but was kept for all to see.

Does it matter if Dorothea Lange staged this image? I don't think so; she was tasked with recording the social injustices along highway 99, California. What better way to do this than to show the gap between those that have, and those that do not. In this one image she showed some could relax on a train whilst others had to walk to their destination.

Commented [DW22]: This is a big jump back to Lange after talking about Stryker. You need to ease readers back a little.

Commented [DW23]: Too flowery

Others staged photographs for the FSA, such as Arthur Rothstein. He staged his scenes to give the FSA photographs that captured the workers suffering which after all was the brief for the organisation. Stryker had the confidence to let this happen. Stryker was most definitely overbearing, however he recognized his team's strengths and allowed them some freedom after he had guided them, if they strayed he would not allow the work to progress. He kept tight rein on the purse strings and wanted control of everything from beginning to end. His military background coupled with his academic disciplines gave him the skills to do this. He was the catalyst behind this great project. Without him it would have been quite different, then at the end of the project he ensured it would be preserved for all of us indeed for future generations to enjoy.

This journey has taken me to many places I didn't expect to visit; the destination is the same I still think "Towards Los Angeles" is one of the best images I have ever seen. Without the Military style leadership of Roy Stryker this collection would probably not exist. We certainly would not have such a concise collection to view and revere.

To read my research and see the letters described please follow the link below.

<https://wordpress.com/block-editor/post/michaelgreenlevel2landscapeblog.photo.blog/826>

Word Count without references 2004.

Word Count with References 2061.

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