

REFLECTIONS ON A PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE

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Margaret Bourke-White. *At the time of the Louisville Flood* (1937)

© Margaret Bourke-White/Timepix.

In January and February 1937 a natural disaster of major proportions occurred in the mid West of the United States: the Ohio River flooded its banks killing over 400 people and making thousands more homeless. Margaret Bourke-White (1904-71), one of America's most successful and dynamic photo-journalists, was dispatched by *Life* magazine to Louisville, Kentucky to cover the flood. *Life* had been founded the previous year and was exploiting a new form of pictorial journalism - the photo-essay - which Bourke-White had

helped to pioneer in the magazine *Fortune*. (1) When Bourke-White arrived in Louisville she found over half the town inundated by water. The blacks amongst the population of Louisville were especially hard hit by the flood - the African American quarter was completely swamped - and had to be temporarily assisted by Red Cross relief agencies. Bourke-White photographed a queue of black flood victims standing in line for food in front of a poster issued by the National Association of Manufacturers complacently celebrating the American way of life. Her photograph, as Theodore M. Brown remarks, 'is thus not a scene of unemployment, or welfare ... Yet, the photograph has been used repeatedly to comment on inequality, poverty and deprivation'. (2) In other words, although the photo was generated in response to a particular, local and temporary emergency it later acquired a much more general significance. How is it that this latter interpretation became commonplace?

Initially, it is necessary to examine the immanent structure of the photo, that is, to identify the precise statement which it makes without benefit of the extra pictorial information concerning the flood. (The photograph itself gives no indication that a flood has occurred.) Compositionally, the photograph divides into two parts: there are virtually two images - the upper background and the lower foreground - in a binary montage relationship (in montage two images can be juxtaposed to produce a third meaning not inherent in either image considered separately). The contrasts involved in this juxtaposition are as follows:

Poster

Whites

Automobile users

Family group

Active, carefree.

In charge of their destiny

Frontal arrangement (facing the future)

Above

Countryside.

Graphic representation (myth, dream).

Affluence.

Queue of blacks

Blacks

Pedestrians.

Individuals.

Passive, careworn.

At the mercy of others

Sideways arrangement (facing the margin)

Below

Town

Photographic representation (realism)

Deprivation.

The depicted whites of the poster tend to dominate the blacks not only because they are above them but also because they are larger in size. Their dog (extreme left) seems to be barking angrily at the blacks and the car they are travelling in appears to be about to

run them down. The poster is a picture-within-a-picture. It is a characteristic of this pictorial device that it heightens the realism of the containing picture, hence the illusionism of the photograph is strengthened by the poster within it; conversely, the encompassing photograph heightens the artificiality of the poster. The contrast between the poster's artificiality and the photograph's realism is also a consequence of the types and facial expressions of the people represented: the whites are idealised stereotypes, whereas the blacks are all unique human beings whose response to their predicament, and to the presence of the camerawoman, varies enormously.

At least four blacks look out of the photograph towards the photographer, towards the viewer; they serve as interlocutors linking us to the action of the picture. A cable cuts across the top right-hand corner of the image and in so doing crosses out the word 'living' as if negating the Association of Manufacturers' over-optimistic headline. The differences between the two parts of the photograph listed above are predominantly oppositional relationships (black/white, above/below); oppositions of content are expressed via oppositions of form: the economic and political domination of white over black is asserted via the formal relations above/below, frontal/sideways, large/small. The division of the picture into two parts, into two separate worlds, embodies pictorially a social division between the races, that is, it *segregates* the blacks from the whites. (Louisville was then a segregated city.)

It is worth pausing to consider the ideological implications of the image chosen by the National Association of Manufacturers to convey their message of cheer. By representing a family of whites the image conveniently overlooks the existence of millions of non-whites in America; by representing the man of the family as the dominant figure - he occupies the centre of the composition, he drives the car, he is in charge of the family's destiny - the

image reinforces patriarchy; by typifying the American way of life in terms of an ideal family the image reinforces the concept of the nuclear family unit as the norm to which all should aspire; by representing the American way of life as a car journey the image reveals the American dependence upon technology, in particular the importance of the automobile industry to the American economy and the obsessive relationship between Americans and their cars. The car journey serves as a metaphor for the American way of life; a journey whose starting point and destination and reason for travelling are not specified by the image: it seems to say 'What matters is to travel, never mind where we have come from, or where we are going'. And this life journey is to be undertaken by each family by itself cocooned against the environment, the landscape, by a metal shroud - the car. Work, industry, the city, social relations outside the family, agricultural production - these are all conspicuous by their absence from the image. What the National Association of Manufacturers signally fail to mention is manufacture itself.

Bourke-White's photograph makes two critical points: first, racism - the white race dominates the black race; and second, economic exploitation - by contrasting the high living standards enjoyed by an archetypal white family with those low standards experienced by a number of black Americans, the photograph explicitly states that there is an inequitable distribution of wealth. The slogans of the poster - 'World's highest standard of living' and 'There's no way like the American way' accentuate the irony of the contrast. Although Bourke-White did not arrange this situation in order to make a political point, her mind was clearly alert for such a possibility - and months spent documenting poverty in the South with Erskine Caldwell had developed her social conscience - because she seized upon the adventitious juxtaposition of blacks and poster with alacrity. The high speed of the camera shutter, the ability of the camera to capture a

fleeting moment, a temporary montage juxtaposition, gives the photographer a clear advantage over the painter in such situations.

Bourke-White's photograph explodes the bourgeois myth that the artist creates order out of chaos. The artist's motif - 'Nature', 'Reality' - is not chaotic, on the contrary, it is highly ordered, structured, coded and stratified (those who rule, those who are ruled; those that own the means of production, those who are wage earners; patterns of behaviour conditioned by economic, social and ideological forces). What the artist, the photographer, does in choosing a motif, and in framing it in his or her viewfinder, is to select and to foreground some relationships at the expense of other relationships (since an image can only depict a part of reality, it cannot encompass the totality of the world). In short, the artist's intention always involves ethical decisions/political commitments, and the photographer's technological means - the camera always imposes the presentation of a view of the world as seen by a single individual from a particular vantage point at a particular place and moment in time. (These qualifications indicate the limitations of a single photograph as a vehicle of information.)

It appears, therefore, that photographs reproduce in their structure, in their codes, the structures and codes human perceivers find in/impose upon the world. (Presumably, if it were otherwise we would not find photographs meaningful.) However, this reproduction is never simple duplication because the medium itself always transforms those codes and structures to some extent; for example, the Bourke-White photograph reproduces the perception of clothing codes and fashion styles employed by Americans in the late 1930s but because the photograph is a black-and-white one, the colour dimension of the clothing code has been eliminated.

One crucial factor governing the interpretation of images is their display context. When Bourke-White's photograph was published in *Life* as part of a photo-essay on the Ohio River flood disaster its reference to a particular emergency was fixed not by its internal information but by the accompanying photographs, captions and text. Once detached from that context the photograph was free to acquire a much more general signification. (Since the photograph itself makes no reference to a flood or to Louisville, only those featured in the photograph, or who helped to produce it, or who read the article in *Life* would be aware of its specific spatio-temporal point of origin.) Joseph Goebbels, a Nazi minister, was thus able to appropriate the photograph's critical content for the purposes of German propaganda by adding to it the caption 'Thank God, we have a better way'.

In his book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott makes a distinction between human documents and social documents. The former concern natural phenomena as yet outside human control, for example, natural disasters and death; the latter concern man-made conditions: 'conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place: racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression ... (3) Bourke-White's photograph made a transition from Stott's first category to his second: it began life as a human document and later became a social document.

What I have been trying to clarify is how the meaning of Bourke-White's photograph is established. There is, however, a difference between the *meaning* of a statement, or an image, and its *truth*. I can say to a class of students in a windowless basement room 'It's raining outside' - a meaningful statement - but to check the truth of this statement the students would need to look outside (empirical verification). Since all

languages, all sign systems, can be used to tell lies, the decision as to whether the statement made by a photograph is true or not is the viewer's responsibility; it is a judgement which he or she makes after comparing the photographic statement with empirical observations or with other cultural knowledge. Few people would have accepted Bourke-White's record of a particular emergency as an illustration of a more general truth unless the condition of the majority of black Americans during the Depression era had been significantly worse than that experienced by the majority of whites, unless racial segregation had been endemic in the 1930s. Just so long as economic exploitation and racial discrimination persists in the United States, the critical realism of Bourke-White's photograph will remain pertinent, the meaning of her picture will remain true.

Notes and references

(1) Bourke-White's photograph appeared on page nine of *Life*, Vol 2, Number 7, issued on 15 February, 1937. The previous issue carried an extensive photo documentation of the flooding. Underneath her photograph appeared the headline 'The flood leaves its victims on the bread line'. A small amount of text was followed by two pages of photographs showing victims of the flood and journalists in the office of the local newspaper carrying on their profession under great difficulties. *Life* magazine was at that time highly successful: it began with a print run of 380,000 copies and by the Spring of 1937 it was producing 675,000 copies.

(2) Brown's quote is taken from *The photographs of Margaret Bourke-White*; ed. by S. Callahan (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p. 19.

(3) William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (Oxford: OUP, 1973), p.

20. (Stott's categorisation is open to objection: natural disasters can be prevented; after the Ohio River flood a river wall was built to prevent a reoccurrence.)

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