

2013

Moving Pictures

Donal Harris

University of California, Los Angeles, dharris@ucla.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Harris, Donal (2013) "Moving Pictures," *Criticism*: Vol. 55: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol55/iss1/9>

MOVING PICTURES Donal Harris

American Modernism and Depression Documentary by Jeff Allred. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 272. \$65.00 cloth.

American Modernism and Depression Documentary makes a convincing case for the redundancy of its own title. As Jeff Allred shows, *Depression documentary*—and particularly the photography often associated with various New Deal cultural projects—is far more unruly than critics usually admit, and it must be viewed as one of many versions of American modernist practice. To contextualize this claim, Allred runs down what he sees as the shared assumptions about documentary-as-genre and photography-as-medium: immediacy, objectivity, mimetic transparency, self-evidence, witness, and the coextensiveness of reality with the field of representation. In every way, then, documentary and photography look like the unhappy descendants of Howellsian literary realism, a model that modernist authors consciously positioned themselves against and spent the first half of the twentieth century turning inside out. Allred counters this opposition of modernism and documentary (as a subset of realism) by arguing that twentieth-century documentary forms, especially those of the 1930s, participate in a “modernist aesthetics of interruption,” a methodology that self-reflexively concerns itself with the same negotiation of reality and representation that documentary is often assumed to take for granted (7). In this regard, Allred’s study can be read alongside those of Michael

North, Sara Blair, Stuart Burrows, Joseph B. Entin, and others that offer nuanced interpretations and material histories of the relationship between literary modernism and photography. By the book's end, we come away with a far subtler definition of documentary, one that consists of a "speculative practice of aesthetic construction" that opens up uninvestigated possibilities for representing "the people" (7).

The study begins by juxtaposing two different versions of *peopleness*. First, Franklin D. Roosevelt's anaphora-laced Second Inaugural Address: "I see a great nation, upon a great continent. . . . I see millions of families. . . . I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" (3). The commander in chief's giant "I" sees the starving masses, and his proposed path out of suffering entails incorporating the down-and-out one third into a fully modern majority. To counter this all-encompassing federal vision, Allred gives Richard Wright's first-person-plural narration in *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) as an example of what Roosevelt's line of sight might miss. Wright insists that "each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land . . . we are not what we seem," and that "[b]eneath [this] garb . . . lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space" (5). In place of the self-evident surfaces that Roosevelt wants

to fix with the New Deal, Wright gives us an historical and affective "knot" that is narrated by a rather ambiguous "we." In Roosevelt and Wright, we find two versions of seeing for oneself and speaking for others. Not only that, but we also find one of the many wonderful insights in Allred's book: that even in what might, in our sepia-toned moments of nostalgia, feel like a period of national consensus about who needs help and how to go about providing it, "the people" was just as highly contested in the 1930s as it is now.

One of the great moves that Allred makes is conjoining his arguments about political and aesthetic representation so that formulations of "the people" always come into contact with a complicated method of photographic *seeing*. Allred primarily traces the implications of this argument through Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). A chapter is devoted to each of the three main texts, and his readings of these works are book-ended by a chapter each on the emergence of the *cultural worker*, and on the corporate photojournalism of Henry Luce's *Life* magazine. Allred could not have chosen better material through which to work out his argument. The 1930s

were the heyday of the documentary book, which combined photographs with prose to shed light on the sundry tales of rural poverty for a largely urban, middle-class audience. Most of these texts were produced by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), directed by Roy Stryker, and the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), a department of the massive Works Progress Administration. The FSA was responsible for hundreds of thousands of photographs, and between 1935 and 1939 the FWP completed over 350 books and pamphlets. From this immense amount of material, Allred pulls out a subset of documentary texts that "do not naturalize that status quo they index in words and text" (7). Instead, he builds his position upon a long tradition of visual theory that goes back at least to Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, and argues that "the particular way some documentaries reference reality as trace subverts their realism by foregrounding contingencies of perception and representation" (15). Allred clearly unpacks the self-reflexive representational gaps in these texts and does so in such a way that the paradox of a *documentary modernism* almost seems inevitable.

One might pause over the disparity between the vertiginous amount of *Depression documentary* available and the relatively insular set of books that Allred addresses. With such an immense archive

available, it might feel like a methodological liability that this study addresses so few examples, with the term *modernist documentary book* possibly describing a set of three. However, to do this would be to miss the larger, more useful point that Allred makes about the strangeness of these texts, and what that strangeness says about our understanding of the breadth and weight of modernist practice. This is because, in the end, Allred is not all that interested in marking off a genre of the modernist documentary book. He employs "modernist documentary book" and "documentary modernist text" interchangeably throughout the study, and this terminological slipperiness alludes to the fact that his interests are not taxonomic. Rather, he wants to reinvigorate a nonmimetic theorization of photography, one in which "the very quality of the photograph that allows it to speak with such seeming immediacy to a mass audience also allows its rearticulation to quite different ends" (5). The "different ends" of photography are the aforementioned "aesthetics of interruption," a term he borrows from Astradur Eysteinnsson to describe how "the *relationship between* the real and representation becomes a primary object of contemplation" (13, emphasis in the original). Allred argues that certain modes of documentary engage in the interruptive techniques of aesthetic

modernism, “confronting readers with discontinuities between word and image and metonymic relationships between the inside and outside of the photographic frame” (170). By emphasizing an aesthetics of interruption rather than continuity, he works toward creating a new grammar for visual culture, one that, he argues, speaks in the *subjunctive* rather than the indicative mood. This documentary photography articulates imagined futures and pasts, as well as the unacknowledged spaces that exist on the periphery of modernizing urban centers.

Allred works out the uneasy relationship between representation and reality in these texts by highlighting their multiple investments in the trope of movement. For Caldwell and Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, photographic perspective and narrative point of view offer ways to interrupt the allocation of cultural knowledge. For Allred, the text traces how “knowing” moves among the photographed subjects, the authors, and the largely middle-class audience. As it toggles between first- and third-person narration, and between prose and photographs, the text questions “the problematic status of unmodern and illiberal ‘folk’ within a modernizing ‘nation’” (63). This might be the most counterintuitive of Allred’s readings, because *Their Faces* has become something of a straw man for

those who want to wipe aside Depression documentary as unsophisticated. The ungenerous reading of *Their Faces* is certainly understandable. Bourke-White and Caldwell caption the book’s photographs with their own maudlin, and at times blatantly racist, projections of what the “folk” think about themselves and their communities. Because of this, readers have often had a knee-jerk reaction against what could be described generously as the authors’ naivety and less generously as their crass exploitation of their subjects’ trust.

However, Allred argues that Bourke-White and Caldwell are actively disrupting the very assumptions about documentary verisimilitude that critics reify when they lambast the text’s refusal to let the subjects speak for themselves. By playing with the “experimental possibilities that invented captions afford” (73), their performative-rhetorical “voicing” of their subjects allows them to “stage the encounter between the titular ‘you’ and ‘their faces’ within a synthetic and overdetermined space in which subject positions shift and swap in unexpected ways” (73). As Allred makes clear, this “you” refers just as much to the people in the photographs as those looking at them, because the process of documentation brings the rural poor into contact with the faces of urban modernity that Bourke-White and Caldwell envision buying their book. In this

way, the authors perform their thesis that “mass cultural objects travel in unexpected ways” and raise “important concerns within American modernism: the place of the intellectual in an unevenly modernizing society, the relationship between residual subcultures and an emergent national culture, and, especially, the relationship between cultural production and the desire of the masses” (90).

The movement of cultural knowledge between authors, readers, and documented subjects in *You Have Seen Their Faces* transforms into a tension between the “rooted folk” and the “(auto)mobile metropolitans” in Agee and Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (95). Here Allred focuses on the emergence of a national culture of “automobility”: the vast infrastructure of highways, gas stations, and motels that emerge in the 1930s and are a prerequisite both for traveling between urban centers and rural peripheries and for documenting that movement. Allred contrasts the utopian horizontality of the open road with Agee and Evans’s “strident critique” of “the undemocratic structure of mass media corporations, the superficiality and exploitativeness of their products, and the degraded reading practices they inspire” (95). Agee, who worked for Time Inc. for most of his adult life, certainly had firsthand knowledge of the “undemocratic structure” of the corporate office; *Let Us Now*

Praise Famous Men was given to him as an assignment for *Fortune* in 1936, and he had ambivalent feelings about its corporate origins from the beginning.

Yet Allred is less interested in the complicated publication prehistory of *Famous Men* than in teasing out how Agee and Evans attempt to negotiate the tension between (urban) mobility and (rural) stasis by “dwelling” with their documentary subjects. The temporary immobility of “dwelling” arises for Allred in the references to automobiles in *Famous Men*, which occur at the periphery of the text, leaving the major descriptions of the tenant families outside of the land of automobility. Allred sees this as the authors’ “desire to move the documentary encounter—the meeting of mass audience, documentarian, and documentary subject in the synthetic space that is not wholly ‘field’ or ‘text’—out of everyday life and into a transcendent realm” (113). He draws on the work of Edward Soja to coin a wonderful term for Agee’s vision of this realm: the “idiotic sublime.” The Greek *idios* refers to “one’s own, a private person” unschooled in the *polis*, so the idiotic sublime is that with the “capacity for being self-contained, self-sufficient, and self-identical” (110); and, for Agee especially, it is the place outside of mass cultural overabundance.

Allred’s reading of Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices*

finds an almost antithetical depiction of movement to Agee and Evans's *Black Voices* provides a collective history of African American migration and reads this gradual Northern movement as the path toward a modernity that is synonymous with class consciousness. It takes a complicated first-person-plural form, a "we" that constantly shifts in relation to the people and things that it represents. This collective narrative perspective, as Allred clearly argues, both engages with and distances itself from a naturalized Southern "black folk" culture. Instead, Allred unpacks the pedagogical impulse behind this narrative mode: it is Wright's attempt to educate a black readership out of what he feels is the false consciousness of black folk culture (151). For Allred, Wright's location of liberated black modernity in a discourse of migration is both problematic and uncharacteristically undialectical because there the South "remains a zone in which the only means of survival lies within a quasi-verbal and ritual-bound accommodationism" (153–54).

This argument comes across most forcefully when Allred describes a photograph of African American children studying their lessons by lamplight while sitting around a kitchen table. The walls and table are covered in newspaper and magazine print, which Allred suggests might be read as invoking an "imagined community" that

brings African Americans into the national collective through a shared print culture. Or, aligning that argument with the other terms of Allred's book, the staging of this photograph forces *you* the reader to allow *them* African Americans into a *we*, "a national family by virtue of shared relationship to print culture" (147–48). It is hard to imagine Wright buying into such a seamless racial integration, though, especially because an all-inclusive national print culture gets undercut by the inconvenient reality of racist Southern political institutions that divert resources away from education for African Americans. As Allred points out, the photograph captures a sad irony: African American children living in a house made of words that most of their peers cannot read. Allred does not go so far as to argue that Wright is in on the joke; in fact, he finds the deepest failure of the text to be Wright's blindness to the unstated "we" that enables *12 Million Black Voices* to exist. As he argues, there is another "'we' that haunts this narrative, the 'we' composed of cultural workers like Wright in his guise as urbanite and artist, as researcher with access to archives, and as theorist armed with sociological models for understanding the flows of capital and bodies that structure individual experience" (153).

Along with Allred's investigation of these modernist documentary

books, he narrates the birth and living-death of the cultural worker in the 1930s. He spreads this out over the two chapters that bookend this study. In these frame chapters, we find a genealogy of *cultural work*: its inception as a powerful Popular Front response to culture as an ahistorical ideal form; its life as the unstated theoretical basis for the form and content of these documentary texts; and, finally, its con-
 scription in media corporations like Time Inc. that “domesticate” the formal experiments of modernism and emphasize a “continuous style” rather than an “aesthetics of interruption.” The first chapter, “From ‘Culture’ to ‘Cultural Work,’” lays out how Depression-era writers theorized the relationship between mental and manual labor in two distinct ways. First, they imagined proletarian art as a radical “democratization of the writing function, such that ordinary workers would write for other workers . . . to foster an insurgent class consciousness” (29). In opposition to this working-class model, Allred also describes the emergence of the writer as a technician or engineer, which preserves the division of mental and manual labor and “envision[s] writing as a specialized form of work whose practitioners were charged with building an intellectual infrastructure for the common benefit” (29). These alternate formulations of literary professionalism take on different ideological characteristics,

representative genres, and projections of an audience.

This chapter concisely schematizes the intellectual landscape of the 1930s, and one can see how the documentary texts of the middle chapters engage with both of these theorizations of authorship. In fact, there is a surprising continuity between the generally leftist origins of the “writer as proletariat” and “writer as technocrat” worldviews and the explicitly conservative project of Henry Luce’s Time Inc. media empire. At *Time* and *Life*, a bureaucratic editorial model makes technocrats out of writers, while their chatty tone and “smart” style recruit the widest readership possible, democratizing a new form of visual literacy—what Allred calls the “camera-guided mind” (171). At Time Inc., the techniques of modernist interruption that Allred has so patiently laid out find a new purpose, as the textual-visual hybrids of documentary texts transform into “a continuous textual space in which readers would marvel at new and spectacular ways of consuming everyday life” (170).

Allred’s optimism does not let the story end with a simple “and then corporations ruined everything.” Instead, he argues that even *Life* can open up as a dialogic site for readers’ agency. In the “Pictures to the Editor” section of the magazine, readers sent in their own amateur photographs of everyday living. These visual responses help

expose the economic, political, and aesthetic chasms that *Life's* continuity style hopes to paper over. The empty oil towns, derelict rural depots, and images of isolated poverty force readers to question just who is left behind in Luce's "American Century." Yet this is a much different "aesthetics of interruption" than the one presented in the modernist documentary book. Here the viewer takes for granted the coextensiveness of the image and the world it represents. The photographs do not interrupt the immediacy of documentary but instead question the comprehensiveness of Luce's projection of a world picture. More than this, these photographs raise questions about how professional we really want our cultural workers to be anymore. As Allred argues, one comes away from this study with the "sense that the Depression era can be seen as a last gasp of sorts for utopian imaginings of a cultural apparatus whose reach is geographically wide and demographically deep, yet allows for artists to address 'the people' with some degree of aesthetic experimentation and autonomy" (188). If cultural work can so easily be brought under the

big tent of Time Inc. and other media megacorporations—a process aided and abetted by the willingness of "serious" artists like Bourke-White, Agee, and others to work for them—then maybe an answer can be found in amateurism, a possibility that hovers on the edges of this study. As the historical trajectory of this fascinating study shows, both "writer as worker" and "writer as technocrat" can be turned into something like "writer as corporate employee"—or, in our moment, "writer as faculty." Clearly this is a problem for Allred, and perhaps rightly. If the last scrap of both artistic and readerly agency can be found in amateur photographs to the editor, then maybe a way out of the double-bind of cultural work is to reimagine culture as something other than work. That we come away from *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* looking for other ways to theorize its central claim just reinforces the lucidity and insight of its critical lens.

Donal Harris is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he is finishing his dissertation "On Company Time: American Modernism and the Big Magazines."