

# The Farm Security Administration and the Construction of the Myth of Documentary Realism

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*Figure 1: Dorothea Lange-On the Road to Los Angeles, March 1937*

## Introduction

The paradigmatic form of concerned photography, which was framed through the politics of reform, is exemplified by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) who were commissioned as part of President Roosevelt's 'New Deal' to shine a light on the adversity suffered by citizens of the United States as a result of the Great Depression. Price (2009: 97) describes this as "*the most important example of a major state-funded documentary project in the world*" with many of its participants entering the "*pantheon of great photographers*" producing work that is often described as revealing the "*human face of Depression Day America.*"

I have chosen the work of the FSA project as they still make an interesting case study about the nature of realism in photography, an issue that despite increased visual literacy remains a contested area of debate. Because the work was state sponsored, had a specific political intent which aimed to influence the viewer, and has now become canonised within an art context, both the practice and the images themselves provoke a seemingly contradictory reading. Errol Morris (2011) believes this is far from resolved and asks these provocative questions which encapsulate the plurality of photographic meaning itself:

*“When does a photograph document reality? When is it propaganda? Can a single photograph be all three?” (Morris, 2011: 133)*

## Roy Stryker: authoring the FSA



*Figure 2: Dorothea Lange-One Man, One Mule, Greene County, Georgia, July 1937*

John Tagg (1982: 126) argues that it was FSA director Roy Stryker who provided the authorial direction of the organisation. Stryker issued detailed shooting scripts to his photographers and ultimately categorised and filed all of their work. Images which did not fulfil the ideological vision of the project were 'killed' with holes being punched through the negatives. Hence the conclusion that "*The total 'world view' of the FSA file was...predominately Stryker's.*" Tagg sees an ideological framework apparent in Stryker's approach, culminating in a desire to show images of

a rural America prior to the effect of industrialisation: "*For Stryker, the picture files exactly represented life as he had known it and wished it to be.*" (Tagg, 1982: 128)

In order to bolster support for the government relief policies, the images followed a strategy employed by earlier socially concerned photographers such as Jacob Riis, who concentrated attention on what can be termed the 'deserving poor.' Solomon-Godeau (2009: 178-9) describes the depiction of the subject as a "*pictorial spectacle*" which is usually targeted at a different class:

*the appeal made to the viewer was premised on the assertion that the victims of the Depression were to be judged as the deserving poor, and this the claim for redress hinged on individual misfortune rather than on systematic failure in the political, economic, and social spheres. (Solomon-Godeau, 2009: 179)*

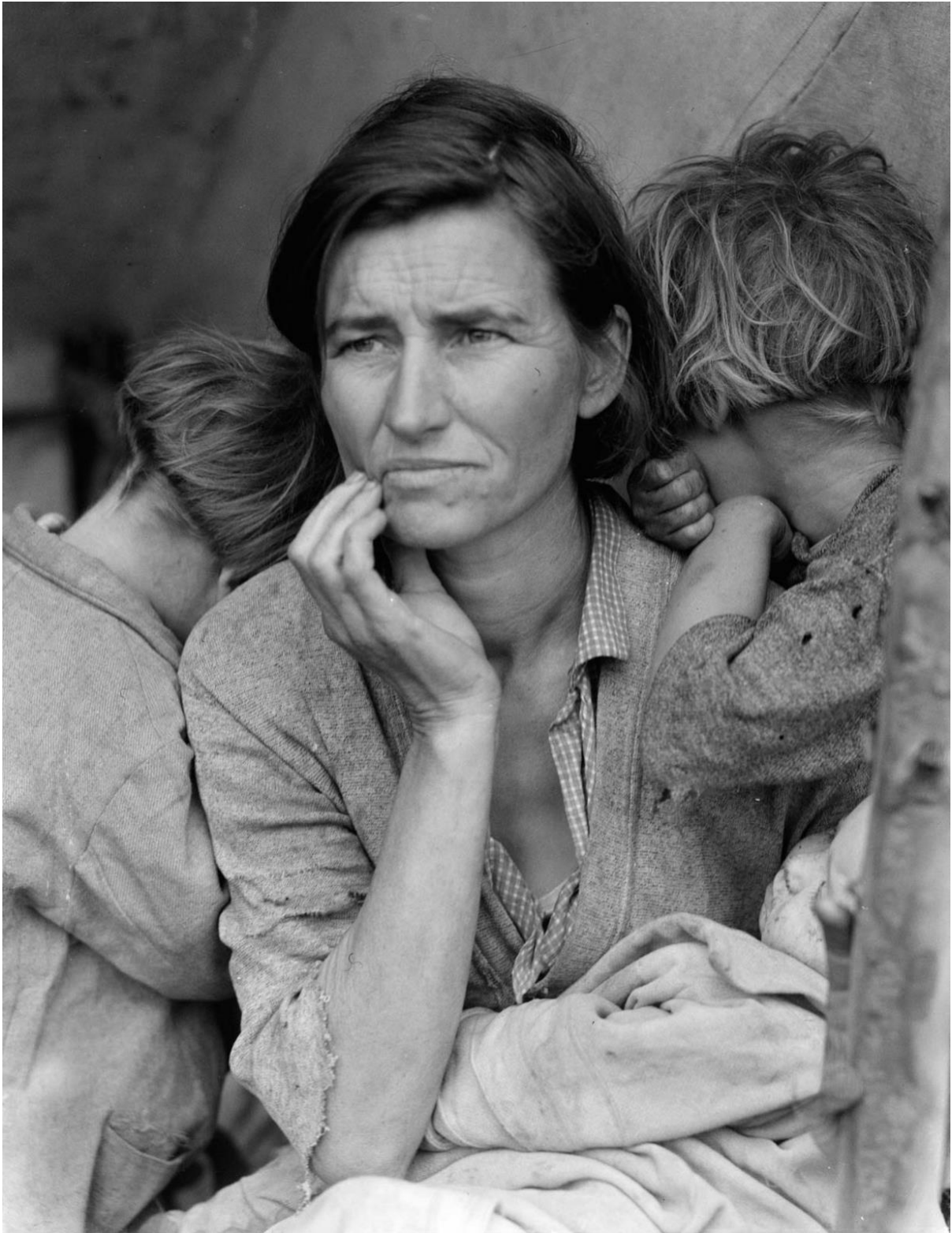
Price (2009: 98-9) asserts that subjects were chosen because of their representative qualities which allowed for empathy from the viewer who could recognise someone like themselves in the photographs. While the images were factual, they were also densely constructed to produce a desired response that transcended what was simply shown. They displayed seemingly contradictory qualities which get to the heart of why documentary photography is so hard to qualify:

*These photographs are treated as historical, but timeless; densely coded, but transparent; specific, but universal. (Price, 2009: 99)*

Martha Rosler (2003) is scathing in her assessment of the type of documentary practice typified by the FSA photographers, seeing it as representing "*the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery*", "*social work propagandizing*" and, "*the reification of wrongs.*" (Rosler, 2003: 261-2) Likewise, she is critical on the effects of such work on their intended audiences:

*The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of consciences in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch...Yet this reminder carries the germ of an inescapable anxiety about the future. It is both flattery and warning (as it always has been). Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. (Rosler, 2003: 263)*

## Florence Thompson - Migrant Mother



*Figure 3: Dorothea Lange-Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, March 1936*

Perhaps one of the most famous and reproduced photographs of all time, Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' raises interesting questions about representation and ethics. Roy Stryker described the image in 1972:

*To me, it is the picture of the Farm Security...She has all of the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too...You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal. (Rosler, 2003: 267)*

The suggestion here is that the photograph transcends the person photographed, becoming symbolism rather than testimony. Rosler asks, "*Are photographic images, then, like civilization, made on the backs of the exploited?*" (Rosler, 2003: 267)

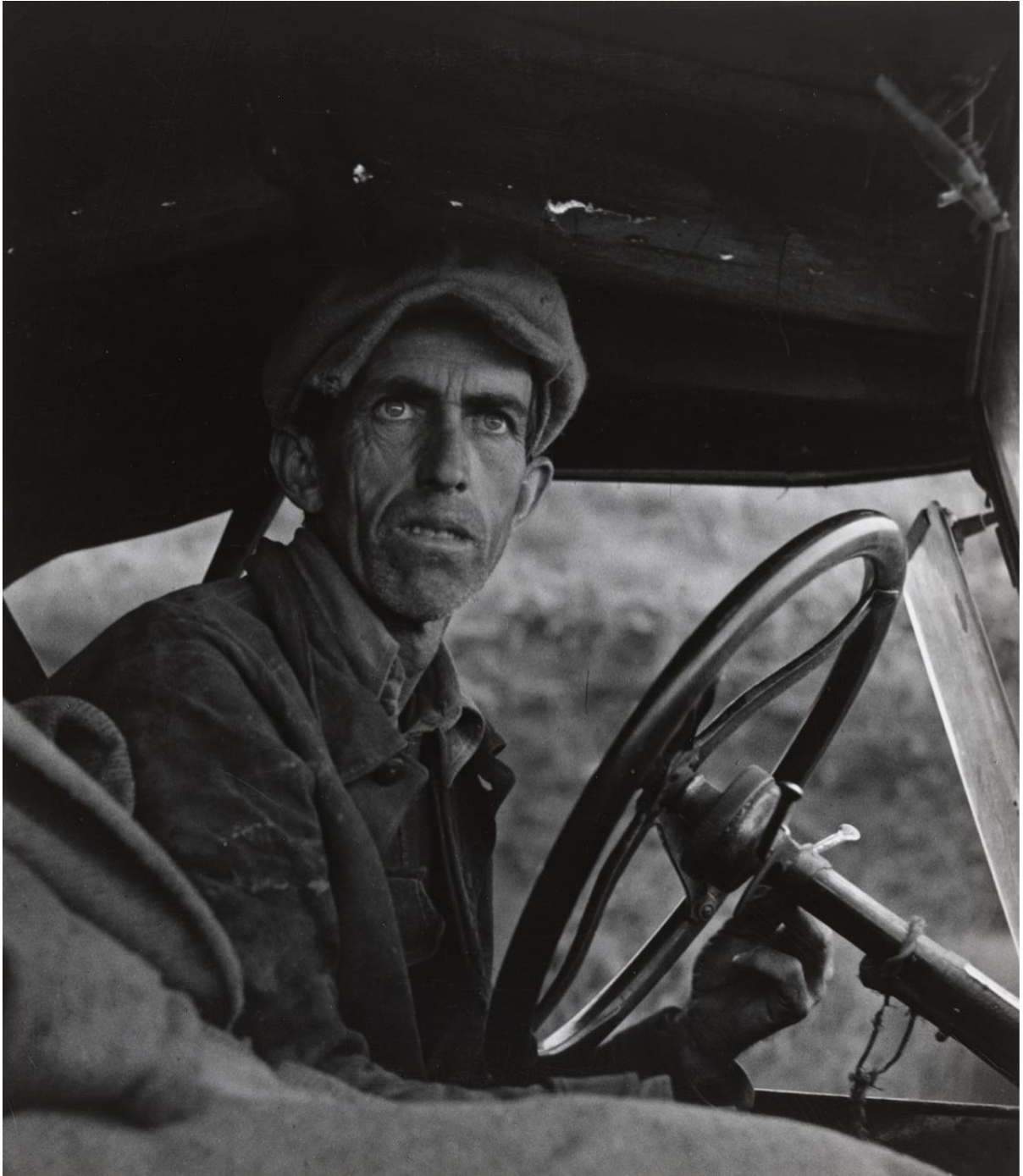
Solomon-Godeau (2009) asserts that the traditional documentary mode is a set hierarchical relation between photographer, spectator and subject. The photographer holds the power in this relationship with the subject being lesser or 'Other':

*For the spectator, the viewing experience constructed both phenomenologically and culturally creates a position of mastery, of scopic command, sustaining the authority of the viewer's look which is further buttressed by more or less unconscious sensations of mastery and possession. (Solomon-Godeau, 2009: xxix-xxx)*



Florence Thompson herself agrees with this argument about the imbalance of power relations at play, stating in 1978: "*That's my picture hanging all over the world, and I can't get a penny out of it...What good's it doing me?*" (Rosler, 2003: 267) This testimony brings into stark relief the lack of real political change or good that even the most famous of documentary images can make.

## Conclusion



*Figure 4: Dorothea Lange-Ditched, Stalled and Stranded, San Joaquin Valley, California, February 1936*

James Curtis describes the aesthetic and methodology of the FSA project: "*The realism was deliberate calculated and highly stylized.*" (Morris, 2011: 133) This statement concisely summarises the ideological nature of the FSA, something that has been obscured by the myth of documentary objectivity. Price (2009: 106-7) argues that although photographs are carefully fabricated, this construction is not immediately noticeable to the spectator who innocently looks upon a scene that is apparently natural and unmediated. However, these photographs are part of a system of power that Michel Foucault termed the 'regime of truth.' For Foucault, these are examples of surveillance, observation and control - an analysis which casts doubt on their apparent reformist intent.

While questioning whether any wrongs were corrected through the work of the FSA, John Tagg (1982: 139) concedes that the work precedes a new economic upsurge that would transform the structure of American society. However, the subjects recorded were already a "*source of reverie and nostalgia*", something that is arguably an integral part of the language of documentary:

*We may live the space of the picture, its 'reality', its ideological field. But as the picture draws us in, we are drawn into its orbit, into the gravitational field of its 'realism'. There it holds us by the force of 'the Past' as successfully as it once exerted the force of 'the Present'. If the majority of photographs raise barriers to their close*

*inspection, making protracted analysis seem 'excessive', then these photographs invite a closer and closer view. The further one penetrates, the more one is rewarded by the minutiae of detail suspended in the seemingly transparent emulsion. We seem to experience a loss of our reality; a flow of light from the picture to us and from ourselves into the picture. Like Stryker, we are invited to dream in the ideological space of the photograph. (Tagg, 1982: 139-141)*

## List of Illustrations:

Figure 1: Lange, D. (1937) *On the Road to Los Angeles, California, March 1937*. [Photograph] At:

[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/44521?artist\\_id=3373&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/44521?artist_id=3373&page=1&sov_referrer=artist) (accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2021)

Figure 2: Lange, D. (1937) *One Man, One Mule, Greene County, Georgia, July 1937*. [Photograph] At:

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56890> (accessed 9th April 2021)

Figure 3: Lange, D. (1936) *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, March 1936*. [Photograph] At:

<https://cdn.britannica.com/17/71217-050-6690956F/Migrant-Mother-photograph-Nipomo-California-Dorothea-Lange-1936.jpg> (accessed 9th April 2021)

Figure 4: Lange, D. (1936) *Ditched, Stalled and Stranded, San Joaquin Valley, February 1936*. [Photograph] At:

[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/53159?artist\\_id=3373&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/53159?artist_id=3373&page=1&sov_referrer=artist) (accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2021)

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