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## Portraits of Women in Early 20th-Century American Photography

Peter Halter

### Reading photographs: Some theoretical reflections

In much recent writing on photography critics maintain that photographs, like all images, are embedded in such a pervasive network of writing that it is not possible to deal with them without having recourse to the written word. Like all images, photographs, in other words, are surrounded by texts, and are read with their help, to the point where the images *themselves* become a kind of text, or at least cannot be given any definite meaning outside and apart from a semiotic system in which language occupies a central place.

However, seeing all photographs as quasi textual constructs obviously ignores the fact that when we make sense of photographs we are still in the first place confronted with *images*. I suggest therefore that we respect the paradoxical status of photographic images by keeping in mind that they are icons, constructed by non-linguistic means, and as such are *objects* that exist *outside* language, but that by necessity we indeed re-enter that world of language as soon as we try to make sense of them. It is this curious double nature of all photographs that W. J. T. Mitchell refers to when he provocatively says that "photography both is and is not a language" (284).

Instead of claiming, therefore, that all images are texts, it would be more appropriate to say that when we try to make sense of an image, be it a photograph or a painting, we do so very much in the same manner as when we try to define the meaning of a text. Reflecting on the way, for instance, in which we make sense of the individual photographs in Robert Frank's *The Americans*, we discover that there are many direct analogies with the manner in which we make sense of, for instance, lyrical poems.

Now, making sense comprises many strategies, most of which have to do with establishing connections, i.e. with relating elements that potentially illuminate each other, be they elements *within* an individual image or text un-

der scrutiny or be they elements of an image or text as they relate to potentially significant elements *outside* them. In the case of photography, this need to contextualize the individual image is particularly striking. John Berger believes that it is a direct result of the specific way in which every photograph is related to time:

A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being effaced by the supercession of further moments. In this respect photographs might be compared to images stored in the memory. Yet there is a fundamental difference: whereas remembered images are the residue of *continuous* experience, a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant.

And in life, meaning is not instantaneous. *Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development.* Without a story, without unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts, information, do not in themselves constitute meaning. (Berger and Mohr 89; my emphasis)

This *necessity to connect* is not only particularly evident when we try to read photographs but comes into play whenever we deal with artistic objects, whether photographs, paintings, sculptures or literary texts. Although it is impossible in any given case to exhaustively contextualize an individual text or a specific image, we constantly attempt to do so in our effort to understand it, anchoring it in both space and time, i.e. synchronically and diachronically. Both of these dimensions are of equal importance. In the following interpretation of a series of photographic portraits from the first half of the twentieth century, I shall therefore in one way or another situate them both diachronically and synchronically, briefly placing them historically on the one hand, and delineating their interactions with other contemporary photographers or photographic styles on the other. The notion of style, moreover, also comprises that of genre. I will try to show that it is meaningful to relate individual photographs to specific *types* of photographs or *genres*, by showing how the expectations that we bring to them in the act of interpretation are to a good extent based on our response to these particular genres. On this level, too, it should be fairly easy to see the analogies between the interpretation of texts and images.

#### Historical dimension: From Pictorialism to Modernism

The photographer who in this essay is at the center of my reflections on portraits of women is Alfred Stieglitz. The reason for this is that he is not only one of the great portraitists in American photography at the beginning of the

twentieth century, but he is also a photographer who worked in a number of styles, not only over the years but also in the time in which he was at the height of his artistic power between the late 1910s and the early 1930s.

Most of the portraits that I have selected, therefore, are from this period, which in many ways constituted a fresh start for Stieglitz. During the previous ten years, he seemed to have lost all interest in photography, mainly because he invested most of his energies in the fight for a wider recognition of the revolutionary movements in European painting, such as Cubism, Fauvism and Expressionism, which were still largely unknown at the time in America. In addition, by the late 1910s, he had also already won an important twenty-year battle, that of making artistic photography respectable. This he accomplished by championing Pictorialism, which for him was synonymous with artistic photography. The Pictorialists were determined to prove that photographs were as beautiful and deserved to be taken as seriously as the best work done in the field of the visual and, in particular, graphic arts. Their photographs were modeled on nineteenth-century Academic art heavy in Symbolism and Allegory. Thus in the rubric Portraits of Women a favorite device was to depict a young virginal woman in a picturesque landscape, holding a glass bubble as a symbol of wholeness, perfection and, possibly, also of fertility, since the glass bubble was vaguely suggestive of pregnancy.

Pictorialism can provide us with an excellent foil for understanding the importance and originality of Stieglitz's work in the crucial period of the late 1910s to the early 1930s that I will focus on. One of the Pictorialists whom Stieglitz had printed in his famous periodical *Camera Work* and whose work still retains some interest today is Gertrude Käsebier. Her work is particularly instructive for the way she used the titles of her photographs. She was one of those who realized how much our response depends on the few words accompanying the images, since photographs, as John Berger once noted, tend to be rich in suggestion but weak in meaning (Berger and Mohr 90, 91). So it was often by means of her titles that she introduced tension and irony, as in the two pictures that I will consider more closely.

The first portrait, which shows a mother guiding a girl into a room, is called *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (Fig. 1). The title is the first indication that any interpretation of the picture has to take into account the religious painting that we see on the wall in the background. It depicts the so-called Visitation, the moment when Mary shares knowledge of the divine pregnancy with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. Since the central character in the photograph is clearly the young girl, the presence of the painting in the background suggests that we see the girl as representing young Mary,



the future mother of Jesus. The threshold scene suggests an uncertain future for the girl, who at this point in her life knows nothing yet about her special vocation. But is the child not much too young to suggest this reading? Not according to Mike Weaver, who maintains that Käsebier was working in the

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*typological* tradition that was of such central importance to the Symbolists and Pictorialists, and “typological time is synchronic: the girl [as Mary, mother of Jesus] is simultaneously evoked at her presentation in the Temple and [by way of the painting in the background] at the visitation” (84).

Gertrude Käsebier is also one of the most interesting Pictorialists because in a number of allegorical or typological photographs she suggests a reading on several simultaneous levels. Thus in *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* the interior with the Victorian child is suggestive of the comfort and security of a middle or upper class home. The photograph, which oscillates between a secular and a religious reading, implies that one can see all mothers as “blessed,” and all motherhood as “sacred.” However, it seems not beyond Gertrude Käsebier, one of the first women photographers who turned her *métier* into a career by running a famous portrait studio in New York, to suggest an ironical reading of the title. The domestic comfort and security evoked in the picture suggest the very traditional definition of woman’s role as nurturing wife and mother. An ironical or subversive reading of the image could therefore regard this image of motherhood as typical of a reactionary turn-of-the-century view of society that had more to do with the patriarchal defense of social privilege than with a viable concept of motherhood.

Such an ironical reading of this photograph is strongly endorsed by some of Gertrude Käsebier’s other photographs in which the titles are more overtly ironical, such as *The Heritage of Motherhood*.<sup>1</sup> It shows a woman in a state of anxiety or suffering, depicted as an isolated figure against a backdrop of stormy, wild, and desolate mountains. They promised us fulfillment, the mother in the photograph seems to say, and then, when in suffering we find ourselves in an arid wilderness, they leave us totally alone.

After 1913, Stieglitz became highly critical of such portraiture steeped in the allegorical mode. He began to lose interest in Pictorialism and concentrated on “straight photography,” a movement whose goals were in many ways diametrically opposed to the principles of Pictorialism. Photographers, as the advocates of “straight photography” argued, should work with, and not against, the possibilities of an essentially technical medium. Photography therefore should not try to emulate the other art forms; it should exploit and explore the unique possibilities of the new medium in order to minutely render all the details of empirical reality with unrivaled sharpness and an unprecedented gradation of tones from brilliant whites to shades of deepest black.

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<sup>1</sup> Reproduced on various web sites, e.g. <<http://www.nhptv.org/kn/vs/artlabkasebier.htm>>.

Paul Strand's *Blind Woman*

An important moment in this radical change in Stieglitz's career is his encounter with the photographer Paul Strand. Strand at this point became almost over night the epitome of the progressive photographer in the Stieglitz circle. He tried in all sorts of ways to learn from the modernists. One way was to create semi-abstract photographs in which he experimented with the tension between depth and the flatness of the picture plane, but he also took a series of portraits in the streets of New York with a hidden camera. These were mostly portraits of "street types," beggars or hoodlums, that came as a shock to those who identified artistic photography with the Pictorialist tradition that had been so prominently displayed in Stieglitz's *Camera Work* up to then.

The most famous of those street portraits, printed in the last two issues of *Camera Work* in 1916/17, is the photograph titled *Blind Woman*.<sup>2</sup> This picture is not only fascinating when juxtaposed with the portraits of the Pictorialists still widely admired in those years; it is an extraordinary photograph by any standard. The eyes of the woman – one of them nearly closed and the other turned to the viewer's right – attract us irresistibly, and so do the big black letters on her breast, spelling out that the person we are looking at cannot see, that she could not see the photographer or stare back at him in defiance on the day he took the photograph. Our paradoxical feelings are increased by the intensity with which this woman seems to be looking at something out of the corner of her eye, something that she, for all we know, cannot perceive. John Berger says in his commentary on this portrait that on one level Strand presents us with a powerful image of *the other* (41), suggesting how great the abyss is between the visible and the invisible, between what we see and what we *think* we *know*, between what we see and what, at the same time, we do *not* see and do not know.

As a matter of fact, this tension between surface and depth, between what we see and what we do not see, inhabits all images but seems to inhabit photographs in particular through their descriptive or referential power. What turns Strand's portrait into a special image is the fact that in true modernist fashion he *foregrounds* this tension. His photograph is referential and self-referential at the same time and thus forces us not only to react to the person portrayed but also to reflect on the act of seeing. Every photograph is taken from a specific viewpoint or position, in all senses of the word: a

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<sup>2</sup> Reproduced in Green's *Camera Work*, as well as in any major monograph on Paul Strand and on numerous web sites, such as <<http://www.masters-of-photography.com>>.

physical or spatial position first, but also, related to it, an aesthetic and even moral position. Thus the very intimacy of the classical portrait has both aesthetic and moral consequences. The fact, in other words, that the photographer moves in on the person photographed until the head and torso, or just the head, fill up the entire space, creates a powerful intimacy but also a sense that we, the viewers, are, together with the photographer, on the verge of violating the integrity of the sitter. We feel that the camera intrudes, and so do we, who can gaze at the sitter in a shameless way which in real life would immediately call for social sanctions. This, as Max Kozloff points out, not only means "that the face has been transformed into a kind of landscape" but also that "the photographer's stare has undisputed sway over it":

The individual posing has submitted drastically to this stare, all defenses down. . . . In an obvious sense, any figure depicted in a photograph is made into an object, that is, a helpless target of our gaze. . . . Within North American or European cultures which consider staring to be indecorous and demeaning to those who are the object of it, the politics of sightlines are worried over. (24-25)

#### *Blind Woman*: Classical portrait and social reportage

*Blind Woman* is both typical and untypical in this respect, since it combines the techniques of a classical formal portrait with the convention of the "candid shot" of social reportage. In typical portrait fashion but complicated by the fact that the person photographed is a "loser," as the Americans would say, we are put in the position of someone staring into the person's face from close-up and thus become the photographer's accomplice in the thrill of the moment. We are, like it or not, put into the position of a voyeur, although we may justify this by saying that we feel the photographer's commitment, the social comment that he is making on the harsh conditions of the big city in which so many are marginalized.

Strand's portraits are also so interesting because they bridge the divide between the art photography of the people associated with Stieglitz and the social photography of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, who are as much admired today for their work as were Stieglitz and his followers in the past. Strand's portrait can thus also be seen as an example of "how the other half lives," to quote the title of Riis's famous book. But it may be precisely because he combines the style of social reportage with the close-up of the classical portrait that he comes dangerously close to exalting the voyeuristic pity for the

lowest of the low, the street beggar. What saves the portrait in this respect may well be that the woman not only wears the sign "BLIND" on her breast but also the plaque with a number indicating that she is a beggar or peddler licensed by the New York City police. This implicates us as viewers and throws us back on our own role because in a larger perspective we are all constantly confronted with the question of the extent to which we are willing to assume a social responsibility – a social responsibility, that is, beyond ensuring law and order, beyond mere policing.

### Two informal portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe

One of the differences between formal and informal portraits, as I call them,<sup>3</sup> is the way in which the person photographed is placed within the frame. In formal portraits, the sitter is isolated to a high degree; thus Georgia O'Keeffe, in Stieglitz's formal portraits, is sometimes shot against the sky, and sometimes placed in front of one of her paintings that appears as an indistinct, abstract shape in the background. In informal portraits, on the other hand, the person photographed is always presented within a specific environment which often turns out to be more meaningful for the reading of the subject than appears at first sight.

Thus, ironically, the portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe at work in the garden of Stieglitz's summer place (*Georgia O'Keeffe at Lake George, 1918*<sup>4</sup>) is more intimate in many ways than some of the full scale official portraits that Stieglitz took of her. We see her sitting on the ground in front of some shrubs, sketchbook and paint box beside her, brush or pencil in her hand, looking up with a frown at the photographer. We get the distinct impression that she slightly resents the interruption and is eager to carry on with her work. The photograph is too casual to be compelling, but it gains as much in intimacy or suggestiveness as it loses in cogency or power. We feel that we have the privilege of being there, as it were, and of sharing a private moment. We also feel that we can imagine what it was like when Stieglitz, O'Keeffe and their artist friends spent their summer days in this place, often working intensely for ten or more hours per day, as Stieglitz mentions in his letters.

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<sup>3</sup> I take this distinction from Kozloff's *Lone Visions*, one of the most interesting books among the surprisingly small number of studies dealing with the portrait in photography.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in Greenough and Hamilton's edition of Stieglitz's photographs and writings, plate 43, or on the web site <<http://www.geh.org/fm/stieglitz/htmlsrc>> (George Eastman House Still Photography Archive).



Such a picture also leaves more room for the kind of awareness that Roland Barthes sees as absolutely essential for the way we relate to photographs, in terms of both their difference from other forms of visual representation (such as painting) and the special fascination that they hold for us. All photographs, for Barthes, are ineluctably related to the past and imbued with a sense of that past, the feeling or *noème*, as he calls it, of “ça a été” (126). This feeling, as Barthes sees it, is related to that of nostalgia but at the same time goes way beyond it:

La photographie ne dit pas (forcément) *ce qui n'est plus*, mais seulement et à coup sûr, *ce qui a été*. Cette subtilité est décisive. Devant une photo, la conscience ne prend pas nécessairement la voie nostalgique du souvenir (combien de photographies sont hors du temps individuel), mais pour toute photo existant au monde, la voie de la certitude : l'essence de la Photographie est de ratifier ce qu'elle représente. (133)

Every photograph, in other words, owes its existence not only to the fact that the world depicted is by definition gone by the time one looks at the picture but that the photographer *was there*, and this sense “ratifies,” as Barthes puts it, the specific scene and the specific moment, and imbues it with an intense sense of a specific past that often has very little to do with nostalgia. Now in an odd sense Stieglitz's informal portraits seem to contain more of that sense of the past than some of his formal portraits, precisely because the person photographed is usually placed in a specific environment and thus bears the imprint of a particular place and time in the subject's and the photographer's past.

The casual, informal portrait thus also profits from the fact that the person photographed is not isolated from, but intimately related to, her environment. This makes it easier to respond to the photograph because the world that the person inhabits and to which she relates is part of the meaning. An excellent example is the photogravure *A Snapshot, Paris, 1911*,<sup>5</sup> in which Stieglitz depicts a woman crossing a street. Both the fact that the woman is bareheaded and the way in which she is juxtaposed with the other people walking in the street are more important for the impact and the meaning of the photograph than appears at first sight. The details of the street scene depicted are part of a past that has to be decoded, and to do so is more difficult when, as in this case, the street scene is almost a hundred years old.

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<sup>5</sup> For a reproduction see the web site <<http://www.geh.org/fm/stieglitz/htmlsrc>> (George Eastman House Still Photography Archive).



One of the reasons Stieglitz took the photograph is that the woman was bareheaded. The significance of this fact becomes evident from a passage in one of the letters he wrote about his stay in Paris after returning to the States:

Paris is the only place I saw at the time that had stallions on the street instead of geldings, and women going through the streets without hats. The women are free, feminine. The men, very male, all going about their work. All simple, alive. Each one arranging his wares with love, with a sense of order, with gaiety. (Quoted in Dorothy Norman 80)

The passage in the letter is striking for the way in which Stieglitz rapidly moves from stallions to the "free, feminine" women, the "very male" men, and the wares arranged "with love" and "gaiety." Stieglitz obviously relates these details because they all express for him an affirmation of the sensual and the sexual that he sees as directly connected to a basic affirmation of life.

Now the informal character of the photograph is obviously related to Stieglitz's sense that the world depicted is "[a]ll simple" and "alive." The simple, uncontrived nature of the photographs he called "snapshots" was for him the appropriate way of depicting a world of people whom he saw as less imprisoned in rules and conventions than the Americans, less inhibited also in expressing themselves, and therefore living in greater harmony with their needs and desires. (The same values and concerns inform some of his later portraits of O'Keeffe, whom he admired not only for her creativity but also for her independence and self-reliance.)

One thing that justifies categorizing the photograph taken in Paris as a snapshot is the random constellation of the various figures in space. But again, this constellation is more meaningful than we may be immediately aware of. Embedded in the accidental and momentary we find a significant opposition between the woman as the picture's unmistakable center and the other, peripheral, figures in it. She is a dark, graceful figure, standing out against the shining backlit street and set against the few other people who are walking or riding in carts in the background and to the left on an elevated sidewalk. The group on the sidewalk forms a counterpoint to the young woman in the street. This group conveys the feeling of being fenced in by the sidewalk railings, in marked contrast to the spacious, bright, open street, which the woman has almost completely to herself. The pedestrians to the left all wear hats; one of them is a woman with a big, heavy hat that catches all the light in what seem to be gauze flowers and ribbons, darkening or blotting out the face underneath. This woman stands as a particular foil to the bareheaded woman in the street, not only with regard to their heads but also

their figures, their bodies, gaits, and postures, all of which enforce the contrast between a way of life that is "simple, alive" and natural on the one hand, and weighed down or even blighted by constricting notions of decency and decorum on the other. One could almost say that the woman with the big, heavy hat symbolizes the Victorian age, and the one crossing the street all the imminent liberation for which millions of women had been waiting and fighting for such a long time.

### Symbolism

It seems that symbolism of this and many other kinds is present in Stieglitz's photographs more often than we suspect, both in his formal and informal portraits. This may be related to an essential need to transcend the momentary in the photographs and to link the particular to the general, the time-bound to the timeless, the seemingly accidental to the typical, or even the contemporary to the mythological. On the other hand, every photographer worth his or her salt also knows that photographs easily break down under the weight of heavy or too obvious symbolism. It is therefore not surprising that at first sight most of the several hundred photographs that Stieglitz made of Georgia O'Keeffe between 1918 and the early 1930s seem to contain no reference to the symbolical or mythological. However, closer scrutiny reveals that many of them are much more firmly based in the European pictorial tradition and its symbolism than has been recognized. Thus, as Mike Weaver has pointed out, the photograph *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait – Hands and Grapes*, 1921<sup>6</sup> is suggestive of a painting by the eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Simon Berthélemy, titled *Erigone* and based on the legend of Erigone and Dionysus. When Erigone received the gift of the vine from Dionysus, the latter fell in love with her and seduced her in the guise of a grape cluster. Stieglitz's image expresses the sexual tension of the moment of seduction. He may have felt that in his portrait it was appropriate to metonymically displace sexual desire from the human body to the cluster of grapes because O'Keeffe had become famous for her luscious flower studies, many of which were thinly disguised celebrations of the female sex. Stieglitz's decision, on the other hand, to include part of a picture-frame in his photograph could be interpreted as a hint that the portrait indeed pays

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<sup>6</sup> Reproduced in Greenough's *Alfred Stieglitz*, plate 36.

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homage to painting, the art form that had been so instrumental in keeping alive the symbolic and mythological heritage of Western culture.

Some of the other formal portraits of O'Keeffe are much more topical, such as the picture in which she is wearing a dark coat and has her hair tightly fixed at the back of her head (*Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait*, 1920; Fig. 2), or the portrait in which she appears in front of one of her paintings in what looks like a man's hat and men's clothes (*Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait*, 1918). Both portraits consciously or subliminally allude to the idea of the androgynous artist, which had gained wide currency in artistic circles in Stieglitz's time. It is rooted in the idea that every genuine artist contains both genders in himself or herself, since true creativity needs to be informed by both the masculine and the feminine principle – the masculine need to shape,

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construct and control as well as a feminine capacity to create by means of intuition and an access to feelings that take the artist beyond the control of the rational mind.

A special case in terms of symbolism can be found in Stieglitz's portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe and other artists and critics close to him containing apples. For Stieglitz and many of his allies striving for a second American Renaissance, apples and apple trees were a symbol for a new Spiritual America with its own indigenous art and culture. Apples in many of Stieglitz's or Paul Strand's images of the early 1920s are a symbol of America as "the apple-laden place," as Paul Rosenfeld put it, the "Earthly Paradise" for which Columbus had already been searching (quoted in Greenough, "American Earth" 48).

One of the photographs showing Georgia O'Keeffe lying on the grass with a basket of apples placed right beside her head seems to me typical of the dangers of symbolism, particularly when one tries to combine it with the more off-handed style of the informal portrait (*Georgia O'Keeffe, A Portrait*, 1921; Fig. 3). One is struck by the somewhat strained gesture of O'Keeffe's hand and the awkward angle of her body as she lies with her head propped against the narrow rim of the basket in what can only be a very uncomfortable position. All of these elements convey tension and uneasiness in a photograph meant to suggest a pastoral idyll.

The second photograph in which O'Keeffe is depicted with apples is an interesting example in terms of a blending of the formal and informal portrait (*Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait – Head*, 1920; Fig. 4). The frontal approach with the subject looking into the camera is characteristic of the classical portrait. All the light, and with it all the viewer's attention, is on the beautiful head, on the forehead, eyebrows, eye-lids, eyes, nose, mouth and chin, all subtly modeled against the dark background. There is nothing to detract our attention from the head and face – except, of course, the apple twig to the left, which adds, this time successfully, a pastoral element to the image, making us aware that it is taken not indoors but in a garden. Those aware of the intended symbolism can see the apple twig as a literal *and* symbolical element, whereas those who do not know what it meant for Stieglitz and O'Keeffe and their friends can just take it as an element that somewhat counteracts and undercuts the severity of the portrait.

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Another portrait that successfully combines the formal and the informal is that of Georgia O'Keeffe in her car (*Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait – In Automobile*, 1932-33; Fig. 5). The car window provides Stieglitz with a frame within a frame, as well as with a black backdrop to the left and above the head. It also provides the “sitter” with a protective space of her own, in a portrait that subtly thematizes the tension between the woman and the photographer scrutinizing her and waiting for the proper moment to click the shutter. O'Keeffe, slightly frowning at the photographer and wary rather than relaxed, with the faintest trace of a smile on her lips set off by the raised eyebrow, allows the photographer to come close, but not too close, because she feels protected by the car, as it were – the car that symbolizes her independence both as a woman and as an artist with her own studio in New Mexico, far from the East Coast and her life with Stieglitz. Moreover, the fact that she

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touches the car with her beautiful hands caressed by the light turns it into an object of desire, symbolizing – at least for the “insiders” – that O’Keeffe by that time had really become attached to her other life away from Stieglitz. That Stieglitz in the early 1930s made several portraits of her in her car symbolically suggests that he respected her newly won independence.

#### Distance and desire: the problems of intimacy in the formal portrait

Stieglitz’s portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe in her automobile is a good illustration of an important aspect of the formal portrait, that of the tension between intimacy and distance. I have mentioned before that when in a portrait session the photographer moves in on the person photographed to take full-size pictures of the head and torso, the photographer invades the subject’s space, so to speak. There are many reasons why the photographer should be aware of this problem of intrusion, one of them being that the sitter, when feeling ill at ease, will no longer subscribe to the “pact” of collaboration and will no longer permit the photographer to scrutinize her face in search of the expressive or revealing photograph.

Two of Stieglitz’s portraits seem to express this tension in particularly compelling ways. One is the portrait of Margaret Treadwell (1921; Fig. 6) – the “mysterious Margaret Treadwell,” as John Szarkowski has called her, who was either a personal friend of Stieglitz’s or maybe just a member of the extended group of family members and friends who spent their summers at Lake George. The woman portrayed here seems to react in a very ambivalent way to the situation. On the one hand she cooperates and offers her beautiful face and body, superbly modeled and caressed by the light, to the camera, but at the same time she is turning her face away rather than looking at the photographer, and the way in which she moves her head back suggests that she rather resents the whole situation. Even in spatial terms she seems to be in need of a support for her head but does not find it, and Stieglitz may have included the door frame to the left so as to prevent her tilted head from floating in space without any visual support. Moreover, the straight lines of the door frame with the light on it effectively counteract the circular lines created by the dark hair around the face and the dark dress around the sitter’s neck and shoulders.



The second portrait is that of Stieglitz's niece, Georgia Engelhard (c. 1920; Fig. 7). It is another superb example of Stieglitz's great gift of combining the formal with the informal. The photograph of the young woman in front of the door frame allows Stieglitz to set the organic shape of the body against the geometric shape of the door frame and the facade. In addition, the glass part with its reflections not only brings in the landscape or garden but also assumes the function of a frame within a frame, setting off the head and shoulders of the girl from the other parts in the photograph almost in the manner of a formal portrait. The white door and facade with the girl dressed also in white in front of it gives a special emphasis to the body posture, contrasting not only the geometrical angles of the arms with the verticality of the composition but also emphasizing the lines of the left and the right arm, with one hand on the door frame and the other on the door handle, respectively. Every detail counts and adds to the impact of the girl who is both floating and anchored in this space filled by an all-suffusing light.

A final detail that catches the eye and needs mentioning is the light on the socks and shoes. Using Roland Barthes's terminology, I would call this detail the *punctum* (48-51). If the *studium* deals with things such as the photographer's intention or the way in which an image can be historically or formally analyzed, then the *punctum* concerns details that defy being categorized or interpreted. Such details are part of the uniqueness of the moment and the uniqueness of the image fixing it – elements that stand out and refuse to be integrated into the overall composition but attract the viewer's notice irresistibly. In this portrait, all the other elements – the door and facade, the girl's dress, her hairstyle, the plant, the urn, etc. – are comparatively timeless and could figure in many other images of a comparable kind. The shoes and the socks, on the other hand, have a distinct period flavor and, almost glowing with vibrant light on them, demand our attention in such a way that we feel almost a child's urge to point and say, Look there, look!

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## Dorothea Lange's social portraits

To conclude, let us turn to a version of the social portrait of the 1930s, as perhaps best exemplified by the photographs of Dorothea Lange. Like Strand, another "concerned" photographer of the 1930s, Dorothea Lange gave much more importance than Stieglitz to the social dimension. In fact, one could juxtapose Stieglitz and Lange as the respective representatives of what Peter Turner and Gerry Badger call "two genres of portraiture, public or society portraiture, and social portraiture":

The two genres are quite distinct, although there are shared traits, mutual tendencies, and overlapping potentialities. . . . Society portraiture and social portraiture may be defined by the subject matter to which each attends, which in turn defines the parameters of the readings we give to the resultant images. Society portraiture, as the term implies, concerns those who have a widely known identity within society, the famous, the not-so-famous, the infamous. Social portraiture, on the other hand, deals with those who have not achieved such distinction, those who are in practical terms and to the average viewer, anonymous. Of course, there are varying degrees of celebrity, widely differing public arenas in which to obtain it. Thus any distinction is part of a continuum, with shifting boundaries for both viewer and viewed. The distinction, nevertheless, can be made. . . .

Allowing for the many contradictions, idiosyncrasies, and flagrant violations inherent in any schema we might devise, the broad distinctions between [the two] portrait genres are thus. In society portraiture, we read biography. In social portraiture, we read sociology. Society portraits are of individuals. Social portraits are of types. (127-128)

This distinction is very useful when we turn to Lange's famous portrait called *Migrant Mother*.<sup>7</sup> It was taken during the later 1930s, when Dorothea Lange belonged to a small team of renowned photographers working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), documenting the catastrophic situation in which millions of farmers, tenants and farm-hands found themselves during the depression years. Lange's *Migrant Mother*, a portrait of a woman she found in one of the improvised camps full of people trying to get to California to find some work, became arguably the most famous American photograph of the Depression years.

*Migrant Mother* is another example of a highly successful combination of the informal and the formal styles of portraiture, a combination of social reportage that firmly roots the woman photographed in a very distinct environment, and of the art of portraiture that gives us the feeling of being in inti-

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<sup>7</sup> Reproduced in Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime*, p. 77, or on numerous web sites.



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mate touch with the uniqueness of a face expressing a unique individual human being. In addition, there are, once again, unobtrusive but clear symbolic overtones: *Migrant Mother* is a paradigmatic image of suffering motherhood, an embodiment of the nurturing woman doing everything to feed and protect her children. It blends the timeless and the time-bound, the spiritual and the secular in an impressive way, turning this mother of seven children who, as Dorothea Lange learned from her, had just sold the tires of her car to buy food for another few days, into a twentieth-century Madonna.

The other photographs by Dorothea Lange that I would like to single out show a characteristic feature of many of her portraits, namely her ability to include what we might call body language. People's postures, the way they stand, sit or crouch, touch their faces, etc. speak volumes in many of her pictures. Thus in the photograph called *Woman of the High Plains*, 1938 (Fig. 8) the woman's gesture and body language express her tiredness and the immense difficulty of carrying on in the face of the hardship of the times much more impressively than does the more conventional portrait of the same woman<sup>8</sup> in which Lange concentrated on the woman's head, although this portrait is beautiful in its own right. In fact, the great majority of Lange's portraits show how much more effective a portrait can be when the expression of the face is in eloquent interaction with the expressive body posture. *Rural Rehabilitation Client, Tulare County, California*, 1938<sup>9</sup> is an excellent example in this respect. It shows an elderly woman in work clothes, leaning against a post with her arms folded and smiling at something that we, the viewers, cannot see because it is not inside the picture frame. One could be tempted to see this woman, who radiates well-being, benevolence and warm-heartedness, as an embodiment of the typical Earth Mother, but the generic implications of the social portrait subtly steer us away from an overtly symbolic reading. The portrait, concentrating on head and torso, shows virtually nothing of the woman's environment, but her posture of repose with her arms folded and the rough fence post against which she is leaning suggest that she has been working in the field, and that the photograph was taken during a rare moment of rest in a life full of hardship and ceaseless work.

However, such a portrait can also not be simply contained within a social or sociological reading. The very uniqueness of the person and the moment depicted, the very *thereness* evoked by it, also create an extraordinary sense of empathy. We may indeed be obliged to read Lange's people in the first

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the web site <<http://www.dorothea-lange-org/gallery-feminism/viewone.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Reproduced in Lange, *Photographs*, p. 92, as well as on the web site <<http://www.dorothea-lange-org/gallery-feminism/viewone.htm>>.

place as types, but their presence and their body language are so powerful that we also respond to them as individuals or personalities. This response creates not only a strong sense of contact and even intimacy but, paradoxically, also of exclusion. It creates the sense, in other words, that we are very close to them but that nevertheless the gap between them and ourselves, between the there and the here can never be closed. It is perhaps for this reason that we respond so strongly to the body language of the people in Lange's portraits – the eloquence of their gestures comes closest to compensating for the fact that in these photographs, too, people are silent and their gestures frozen, fixed forever. Every photograph, in John Berger's words, gives us "an instant of the past" that is "arrested" and that therefore "can never lead to the present" (Berger and Mohr 86).

#### Conclusion: Some reflections on the aesthetics of portraiture

Every photographic portrait is not only informed by this crucial tension between the past and the present; it is also informed by the tension between the accidental and the general, between surface and depth, between what we see and what we intuit, between the sitter at the unique moment depicted and his or her personality transcending any specific moment in time. Beyond these basic parameters, however, there are major differences not only between the society portrait and the social portrait but also between the formal and informal kind. Among the many things that come into play in these different genres of portraiture is the relationship between the photographer and the person photographed. In the formal portrait, as Max Kozloff puts it, the photographer and his model are "participants" in a "common ritual" who "[know] themselves to be partnered in an open-ended but definite transaction":

They both [perform] gestures, from physically opposed viewpoints, imagining that some kind of *representation* would be made available. Such a visual product would stand for the "person," much as a verbal statement may be understood to propose a thought. Something from its own level of organic or psychic existence is reduced to a sequence of signs (an individual's appearance, immobilized from one vantage point, at a particular moment), and those signs are said to indicate or represent that "something" we don't see. In this view, *the record of physical details allows us to speculate about the interior consciousness of an Other*. (21, my emphasis)

Such a way of relating surface and depth, physical details and interior consciousness, is of course always fraught with problems, not the least of which concern the relationship of the sitter and the photographer. The "common ritual" in which they are involved often implicates them to the point of turning them into accomplices. In the formal portrait, according to this reading, the truth of accurate representation is frequently obviated in favor of self-representation and self-fashioning (of both sitter and photographer). The informal portrait, on the other hand, is much closer to the idea and tradition of the "candid shot" and thus contains the promise, as it were, to bypass the controls exerted by the sitter and/or the photographer over the final product, and to reveal what otherwise often remains hidden.

These assumptions (and the related practice of trying to take the person photographed with his guard down) move the informal portrait dangerously close to the "grab shot" that takes the subject by surprise. However, as Max Kozloff points out, it also liberates the subject because it is involved in a much more relaxed and unpretentious portrait genre which "never aimed to be as conclusive as the formal mode":

The last thing that would occur to portraitists of this sort would be to assign any permanent social role or psychic label to their subjects. In this genre, the work may risk being porous and unincisive. But it also tends to be generous, even spacious, for the photographer is part of the social moment, visualizing that moment as one in which human personalities burgeon with the interactions they themselves create. Even if the subject poses, that activity appears as kinetic motion which the picture stops only provisionally. (13)

The portraits that I have looked at in this essay would largely confirm this view. The informal portraits (and in many cases those that combine the formal with the informal) seem to be less weighed down by the implicit need to represent the sitter's personality. They are more open to the accidental but for this very reason often seem to contain more of the magic of a particular moment. Their special appeal confirms Roland Barthes' thesis that what separates photography from the other visual arts is both its special relationship to the past – to *ce qui a été* – and its power to record the minute particularities of a specific moment, down to the odd or mysterious details – the *punctum* – puncturing them. The very strangeness of many of these details serves as a reminder that in all photographic portraits, hard as we may try to "speculate about the interior consciousness of an Other," the sitter will ultimately always keep his or her secret.

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