

BOOK REVIEWS

At Home and Abroad

American Modernism and Depression Documentary. By Jeff Allred. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 288 pp. \$65.00 cloth.

Last year, to great fanfare, Morris Dickstein's enormous compendium of Depression-era culture, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, appeared just as the current financial meltdown was making it clear that the Great Depression of the 1930s—seemingly a distant event with little relevance to contemporary economic expansion—was not aberrant, but rather a recurring structural feature of capitalism. Will the troubles confronting America's workers today generate the kind of political/cultural explosion of the 1930s, when writers and photographers who took pens and cameras out into the field tracked poverty and resistance across rural and urban landscapes? Jeff Allred's *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* shows why black and white—the idiom of truth ever since Dorothy glimpsed Oz—maintains such an intense and enduring grip on the contemporary imagination.

Through a series of case studies of what John Puckett called “the phototextual book,” Allred resurrects three signal Depression books: James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*. None has been forgotten—in fact Palgrave is publishing new anthologies on *Praise* and *Wright*—so it's difficult to say something innovative about these key works of 1930s documentary culture. Yet, in focusing on the continuity between the documentary project and American modernism, Allred finds a new route to these works, neither nostalgic nor dismissive.

In chapters that offer a roadmap of 1930s phototexts—starting from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and ending at the book's originator Henry Luce's *Fortune* magazine—Allred brings archival materials, the notes and scrapbooks of Agee and Evans, into deep conversation with the corporate forces shaping the visual ecology of 1930s magazine culture.

He shows vividly that the huge apparatus Luce devised to convey modern thought to the American masses was generative of a new kind of sensibility among writerly photographers and imagistic writers. Reminding us of Evans's importance to the project, Allred describes the scrapbook Walker Evans kept; this personal collection of photographs from various popular sources—advertisements, newspapers, magazines—constitutes an intimate collage, an archive connecting directly to the oblique relationship Evans, especially, but also Agee had to the behemoth media corporation of Time, Inc. and to the world of kitsch, a subject lovingly revealed in the Metropolitan Museum's 2009 exhibition of Evans's enormous postcard collection.

Agee and Evans purposefully used their employment at Time, Inc. to develop a modernist form that bridged aesthetics and populism thereby setting the terms for a kind of American late-capitalist postmodernism *avant la lettre*. Plumbing the workings of the mid-twentieth-century Culture Industry, Allred opens up new dimensions of their collaboration. Realizing that Evans was fascinated by macabre images pushes one to revise the assessment of Evans as a "straight" photographer. Moreover, thinking about Agee's investment in "middlebrow" mass publications makes the over-the-top elements of his prose something as akin to a barroom diatribe as to Joycean stream-of-consciousness. This comingling of the street talk and aesthetics freed the two to play with the boundaries of realism, to work together transmedially—using text and photography in syncopation.

In prose at once lucid and dense, deeply dialectical in its ability to hold complementary and contradictory ideas in tension, Allred crafts elegant exegeses on texts sometimes seen as excessively simplistic or obsessively idiosyncratic through deft attention to archival sources and a rich understanding of the various theoretical debates superintending work on visual culture. In particular, he explores literary modernisms' many guises, Depression-era politics, and intellectual labor. The tight focus of his book belies its complex engagement with politics and culture and the technologies of their transmission that allows him to interrogate key dichotomies: high/low, document/fiction, insider/outsider, politics/culture.

For instance, Allred reanimates the tired discussion of proletarian literature and the sectarian debates surrounding it during (and since) the 1930s. Shifting perspectives ever so slightly by reading Michael Gold's earliest essay from 1921, "Toward Proletarian Art," in the context of Thorstein Veblen, then Veblen through his "biographer" John Dos Passos, and then all three via ideas about the role of cultural work within the dual fronts of emerging expert administration culminating in the New Deal and Progressive-era disputes about the place of intellectuals on the Left, Allred recharges Popular Front history. What had seemed settled is up for grabs; new veins open and he's able to see past what has come before and "recompose" it (to use one of his tropes) into new patterns. Just as Allred

revivies Gold's efforts by recasting his work as a "collector, collator and layout artist" of proletarian ephemera, he resituates Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell as manipulators of the very popularized and degraded forms—pulp fiction and *Life* photography—that have tainted critical assessments of their landmark 1937 book. Through his canny connection of *You Have Seen Their Faces* to *Sullivan's Travels*, Allred shows how mass media's roving insiders could perform savvy critiques of their positions as simultaneously native informants and utter strangers to this apparently unmodern space: the rural South. By the 1930s, no place in the United States was untouched by mass media—shaped, in part, by the images and texts made by Bourke-White and Caldwell—and the documentarians and their subjects knew it. In this covert awareness, Allred argues counterintuitively that, commercial and exploitative as it was, *Faces* had a knowing quality lacking, or at least self-consciously covered over, in Agee's and Evans's self-aware critical monument.

One of the ongoing themes Allred discerns lurking within the overt content and structured through the forms of the three case studies is the imbrication of the pedagogical with the technological. The modernist documentary delivers its message via machinery: cars, cameras, news wires—"aesthetic construction in a subjunctive mode," he calls it. This is achieved also by his readings, which work to teach us new ways to read ourselves reading. A materialist critical procedure demands an ethical reading practice attuned to the cultural work performed by each "author." Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, as Allred brilliantly dissects it, is a pedagogical text on the "we" of race and nation. Yet I find it disappointing that Allred effaces the labor and apparatus of Edwin Rosskam as "photo director" and his work culling the Farm Security Administration photo archive for the book. He also ignores archival materials from Wright's papers that form their own sort of scrapbook full of newspaper clippings and reveal his debt to tabloids and pulps.

I have been reading the texts Allred foregrounds for decades. I'm jaded. Still, reading Allred's creative juxtapositions of, say, Agee's prose and automotive history (which includes Agee's prose), I found myself saying, "Hey, why didn't I think of that?" or "Yes, then why leave out the erotic undertones in the story of driving Emma to her impending 'wedding'?" I came away with a renewed interest in once again reading these books that literally sit piled on my radiator, next to my dining room table where I do my writing, to go back and rethink all American things modernist and documentary—yet again.

—Paula Rabinowitz, University of Minnesota