Mind’s Eye, Minds Manipulated: Society Seen Through Photography

By Eugene Levy

Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950
By Maren Stange

Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered
By James Curtis

MANY, perhaps most, of the impressions we have of the modern world are derived not from experience, not from an oral tradition, not from the written word, but from photographic, and most recently electronic, images. The encompassing quality of these images, their power to shape our understanding of self and society, have been emphasized most recently in the various exhibits and publications related to photography’s sesquicentennial in 1989. Symbols of Ideal Life and Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth are not literally part of these anniversary commemorations, but they share with many of them a critical, at times even hostile, approach to the social uses made of photographs by those who took them and especially by those who controlled their dissemination.

Maren Stange is especially critical of the disseminators in Symbols of Ideal Life, her study of the best known documentary photographic projects of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. In four well-defined chapters Stange treats Jacob Riis and the tenement reformers, Louis Hine and the 1907-08 Pittsburgh Survey, the Depression-era photographers of the Farm Security Administration and finally, several efforts at documenting mid-century culture and society, culminating in Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibit in 1955.

Throughout her treatment, Stange carefully distinguishes photographers from those who controlled the distribution and publication of the photographs. Of the photographers, only Jacob Riis takes it on the chin, largely due to Stange’s evaluation of Riis as a much better publicist than photographer. Stange might not have intended to “discredit or unmask Riis,” but it is clear that she believes she has done just that by showing how Riis manipulated his own photographs as well as those of others to “colonize and dominate” urban immigrant workers. Such a usage of photography, Stange insists, served fundamentally selfish “middle-class interests” as represented, for example, by the turn-of-the-century tenement house reform movement.

A generation later, Louis Hine, who in Stange’s view established documentary photography with his work for the Pittsburgh Survey, rejected the Riis model and “never succumbed to technocracy or social engineering.” Hine led the way for later documentary photographers such as the FSA’s Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange and Ben Shahn, all of whom struggled honestly and artistically to depict the harsh realities of an exploited underclass America.

Stange goes on to argue that those who controlled the dissemination of the photographers’ images had other goals. When she compared the original photos of Hine and Lange with the published versions, she found that editor/bureaucrats, such as Paul Kellogg of the Pittsburgh Survey and Roy Stryker in charge of FSA photography projects, with their technocratic-reformist prejudices, often crassly manipulated the images, surrounding them with misleading text that merely “collaborated with corporate capitalism by providing a theory of benign social engineering that helped to mask the facts of class exploitation.” By her concluding chapter Stange can barely contain her contempt for photographer-turned-propagandist Edward Steichen, who by the 1940s frankly indicated that he didn’t “give a hoot in hell” for photography as a fine art.
The lens of Gordon Parks's camera caught a worker at a Pittsburgh grease plant in 1944 filling large pans by maneuvering a pipe suspended from a kettle of cooked grease. Parks worked with the well-known Roy Stryker and other photographers for several years in the 1940s on a project sponsored by Standard Oil. Although the company said it wished to document the oil industry's broad influence in American life, two of the photographers quoted in Maren Stange's *Symbols of Ideal Life* later called themselves "well-to-do, happy, free whores." Stange believes the team produced many artistically satisfying images while also dishing out "cultural propaganda" for the oil giant.
In most ways there is little new about Stange’s stinging commentary on the limitations of the American reform tradition. Political historians as mainstream as Robert Weibe and Irving Bernstein argued a quarter of a century ago that Progressive and New Deal reformers were just that — reformers. While most wanted to meliorate the harshness of capitalism, very few sought to dismantle or even weaken the capitalist system. Stange joins a long line of more radical critics who see such meliorism as not only hopeless, but counterproductive. Hine, Lange and other documentary photographers, however, are saved from damnation because, at least in Stange’s view, they were not bourgeois reformers misusing photographs as instruments of social engineering, but artists honestly attempting to depict the complexities and agonies of the industrial world.

Stange argues her views forcefully if not well. Her text is heavy going, not because of the ideas but because of a writing style that conceals considerably more than it reveals. One can tolerate political buzz words, but the post-structuralist jargon is deadening. The photos “mediate” and “signify” as we “deconstruct” the “gaze.” The text is larded with “codes,” “inscriptions,” “icons” and “indexes,” the last defined for us twice (pages xiii and 66). A brief quote by Louis Hine (86) is more helpful in understanding Stange’s point than several paragraphs of her own prose. Thankfully, we have the photographs which help us again and again in understanding Stange’s argument.

None of these problems mar Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth, James Curtis’s study of Depression-era photography of the Farm Security Administration. Like Stange, Curtis is centrally concerned with what he calls a fundamental “conflict over the process of photography and the meaning of the individual image.” However, Curtis’s study benefits both from clear, crisp, jargon-free prose and its concentration on photographers Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee. They were all linked to Roy Stryker, the tireless bureaucrat who directed the FSA photographic efforts, and who was always eager to draw positive, even cheerful, messages from the most doleful images of 1930s America. Curtis does a masterful job of showing how each photographer worked through, around and sometimes in open opposition to Stryker’s manipulative efforts.

Curtis’s research is thorough, especially in his deep mining of the almost 40,000 images in the FSA archives. The results of this research are especially evident when Curtis, in almost cinematic fashion, zooms in on alternative takes of some of the best-known FSA photographs. His analysis of Evans’s 1936 “street scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi,” for example, reveals the conflict between the techniques Evans used in composing the photographs and the social “truths” they seem to imply.

Curtis is equally impressive in his handling of other FSA photographers. Most stunning is his treatment of Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photographs, one of which is arguably the best known image to come out of the Depression. In this and related photos Lange was able to create what Curtis calls the “shock of displacement” we associate so closely with the era’s rural migration. Almost as impressive is his chapter on Lee’s “Pic Town” photographs, where the commitment of both Stryker and Lee to a story on “frontier democracy” often conflicted with the social/political realities of the small New Mexico town.

Finally, both publishers deserve praise for the high quality of the volumes. Cambridge University Press and Temple University Press clearly took care in such matters as jacket design, typeface, paper quality and larger than usual format, so as to do justice to the artistry of the photographers and the scholarship of the authors. ■

The Atlas of Pennsylvania
Edited by David J. Cuff, William J. Young, Edward K. Muller, Wilbur Zelinsky, and Ronald F. Able

ANYONE would be proud to own this magnificent book. Among the various state atlases, it stands alone in comprehensiveness, visual presentation, and overall scholarly quality; at nearly 300 pages, it is a third longer than any other. Unfortunately, the high price will probably deter some from purchasing it. After all, a good collection of maps can be found in Pennsylvania: Atlas and Gazetteer (De Lorme Mapping Co., 1987), available for $12.95 in large format paperback. That said, there is really nothing that approaches The Atlas of Pennsylvania. It includes a wealth of information and such a gorgeous array of maps and illustrations that it is best appreciated when read in small doses. Each reading, no matter how brief, rewards one with greater insights into Pennsylvania.