

**John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties  
Photography.***

**University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago, 2006,**

**ISBN 0-252-07322-3**

As the Western economies spiral toward recession and Wall Street tremors, comparisons with the days of the Great Depression become increasingly prevalent in the popular press. From musings as to whether Barack Obama is the next FDR to discussions about deposit insurance and fears of runs on the financial institutions, the ghosts of the 1930s seem to be lurking between the lines of many of the major American dailies.

American cultural historian, the late Lawrence W. Levine argued however, that to truly understand the United States of 1930s, we must move beyond the simple mythologies, beyond FDR and the Breadlines.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the arts of the 1930s provide insight into the American experience of the Great Depression. The emergence of radio as a major medium, the refinement of film and photography and the massive government support of the fine arts through the Federal Arts Projects of 'Federal One' all provide the researcher with a wealth of material and material culture through which to piece together the American experiences (and there are many) of the Great Depression.

Of these various media, none has received as much attention as photography of the 1930s. Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936) is one of the most iconic images of American history and the work of Lange and her compatriots has been the subject of numerous intellectual investigations. Notable works in the canon include William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Fleischhauer and Brannan's *Documenting America*, Daniel, Foresta et al's *Official Image*, Natanson's *The Black Image in the New Deal*, James Curtis' *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth* and Finnegan's *Picturing*

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<sup>1</sup>Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.280.

*Poverty*, not to mention numerous works on the individual photographers. One could be forgiven for wondering whether there is anything new to say in John Raeburn's *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*.

Raeburn does manage to shine new light on the photography of the American 1930s, in particular on the artistic side of the period's photographic expression, an aspect often overshadowed by the prolific and now more familiar documentary photography of the federal agencies. *A Staggering Revolution* examines the way American photographic expression emerged and began to be accepted as an art form, and the way American audiences responded to this art. Raeburn rightly reintroduces Edward Steichen, famous for his celebrity portraiture, as a key player in foregrounding photography, as well as a supporter of the documentary photographers of the day. Steichen's influence was enormous and he deserves to be restored as one of the key players of the era.

Technology of the 1930s not only refined the moving image; it made the still image more accessible. New inks and papers allowed a much higher quality of reproduction to be available at affordable prices. Publishers seized on these technologies and the period saw the rise of a number of camera periodicals focussing on photography as an art, as well as the pictorial magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, which used photography to tell stories. To understand the power of the image during the Great Depression, one has to understand the ways in which quality photographs were suddenly available in such great numbers, not only on the walls of museums but also in one's own living room. The context provided by *A Staggering Revolution* in illuminating this trend is a vital element that, if not missing from earlier works, is downplayed in many of them.

When discussing Steichen, the camera pictorials, the Museum of Modern Art's cautious ventures into photographic exhibitions, Ansel Adams and the West Coast's f6.4 group, Raeburn's book provides good insight and a much

clearer picture than many of its predecessors. Perhaps then, a singular focus on artistic photography would have made this work stronger, but in defining the book as a cultural history of photography in the 1930s, Raeburn cannot ignore the documentary photographic work of the era, and it is here that the book's weakness becomes more apparent. At times the author seems too determined to use an artistic model as the dominant model, and while the Farm Security Administration (FSA) hired several famous artistic photographers among them Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, these photographs were taken for very different reasons than the artistic pursuits described in other chapters. In fact Ansel Adams reportedly declared that FSA shooters were not photographers so much as sociologists with cameras.<sup>2</sup> Trying to explore these social photographs using an artistic work often feels forced as though the other factors and influences at play are being deliberately framed out.

At times this leads to oversimplifications that don't always sit well historically. For example, in discussing public misgivings with regards to propaganda (as the FSA photographs are sometimes considered to be), Raeburn suggests that mistrust of the genre stemmed, in part, from the propaganda emerging out of the Soviet Union and Fascist countries in Europe. While this may have been partially true, it is also true that many Americans in the 1930s admired Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, all of whom were seen as being the bringers of modernisation and potential prosperity to their countries. If Americans of the era were uncomfortable with propaganda, it may very well reflect, as other historians have suggested, an ambivalent relationship with their own government more so than a genuine recognition of the way European propaganda masked the evil that gave birth to the 'Final Solution' and the 'Gulag Archipelago'.

Raeburn also falls into the trap of trying to emphasise the importance of the artistic photography of the era, by de-emphasising the documentary

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*, p.272.

photography, arguing that it was not nearly as familiar then as it is now. Approaching history as though it is balanced on a see-saw in which only one end can be up rarely works, and in this case, Raeburn ends up contradicting himself to a certain degree. It is true that, as he points out, it is popular misconception that the FSA photographs featured prominently in *Life* when in fact reproductions of the FSA in this publication were rare. But as Cara Finnegan discusses in *Picturing Poverty*, they were much more common in *Life's* major rival *Look*, which had a circulation peak of 2 million (per issue) in 1937 and an average of 1.5 million.<sup>3</sup> FSA images also appeared in *US Camera*, including the prestigious 1939 annual in which the FSA was given a special section, championed by Edward Steichen himself and captioned with responses from the 1938 First International Photographic Exposition at New York's Grand Central Palace; a fact that Raeburn discusses at length.

The final shortcoming of *A Staggering Revolution* is that there aren't enough photographic plates. This may seem to be a finicky complaint, but often Raeburn discusses lesser-known images in great depth, particularly in his chapter on Bernice Abbott's photographs of New York. Abbott was one of the few photographers sponsored under Federal One, and as such is another often ignored chapter of 1930s photography. Similarly to his treatment of Steichen, Raeburn's reintroduction of Abbott into the discourse is too his credit. But the in-depth analysis of her photographs needs to be accompanied by those images; for too many examples this is not the case. The reader is instead asked to simply trust Raeburn's analysis rather than juxtaposing it with their own. And while that analysis is well thought out, nevertheless one must provide the audience with the chance to draw their own conclusions.

*A Staggering Revolution* is in final summation, not without its flaws, but it does, nonetheless deserve a place in the canon of 1930s photography. Taken alongside other works such as those of Finnegan, Curtis and Daniel mentioned earlier, the shortcomings with regards to the documentary

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<sup>3</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA photographs*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1993), p. 185.

photographs seem less pronounced, but the contributions toward a broader contextual understanding through discussions of the artistic side of the medium remain important and interesting.

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