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‘Fragment,
experiment,
dissonant prologue’:
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‘Fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue’: modernism, realism and the photodocument **John Roberts**

Modernist realism

There is a common tendency to think of realism and the photodocument in the 1920s and 1930s as existing largely separate from the textual and rhetorical demands of modernism. The rise of documentary and the new realism is usually assumed to subordinate photographic form to the would-be privileged truth-telling powers of photography as such. Yet, while documentary was emerging as a category from out of the Soviet and German avant-garde in Britain, the US, and elsewhere, this distinction across many photographic practices was actually less discernible than we might first imagine. In fact, there is a persuasive argument to be made that much of the most convincing documentary practice of 1920s and 1930s produced outside of the Soviet Union arises from *within* the category of modernism. However, one of the main reasons we are unable to see this ‘realism-into-modernism’ and ‘modernism-into-realism’ more clearly is that the conditions of reception for this work have become separated from the historical record. There are two related aspects to this obfuscation: firstly, the rapid drive of the means of cultural distribution in the capitalist West in the 1930s to transform the sequential, ‘scripted’, internally ‘narrated’ content of photography into highlighted, unique moments for public consumption; and secondly – and coterminously – the general tendency within post Second World War modernist theory to privilege discrete works from a given sequence of images or research programme in order to prove the singularity of the photographer’s vision, as part of the general attack on the collective programme of documentary practice. Indeed, post-1950s photographic modernism is mostly constructed on a highly contentious premise: where 1920s and 1930s modernism embraces the systematic language of avant-garde realism, it is only as a stylistic spur to great ‘picture making’ (rather than anything as tendentious as the critical refutation of the myth of the ‘photographer’s eye’).¹ A self-aestheticizing pincer movement is duly created. What appears (on the basis of prior selection for ‘quality’) to be the singularity of

¹ See in particular John Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye*. New York: MoMA, 1966. For a discussion of the repression of ‘sequential thinking’ in the formation of post-war photographic modernism, see Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT, 2006. For a discussion of ‘modernist documentary’ see, Joseph Entin, ‘Modernist Documentary: Aaron Siskind’s *Harlem Document*’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2, Fall 1999, pp. 357–382.

the photograph (as against its discursive and systematic production) is ultimately assumed to be a confirmation of photography's transcendent relationship to its original conditions of production. In short, post-war photographic modernism reduces the early avant-garde's alliance between realism and modernism to a kind of superfluous residue, as evidence of an unworkable partisanship.

Nevertheless irrespective of the post-war careers of individual photographers from the 1920s and 1930s, reflection on their output suggests a very different picture. Compelled by both the proto-filmic modernism of the avant-garde, and by the realist dictates of 'truth-telling'-in-sequence, many photographers followed the discursive programme of the avant-garde, over and above any commitment to the merits of the singular image. Indeed, far from channelling the photograph into the confines of singular, aestheticizing authorship, many photographers embraced the pivotal form of the early avant-garde – the book and its collaborative agency – as the ideal horizon of a new realist practice. Bill Brandt (*The English at Home*, 1936) Aaron Siskind (*Harlem Document*, 1940) Walker Evans and James Agee (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941) and Roskam and Wright (*Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941), all adopt the open conditions of the literary form as a way of testing the 'truth-conditions' of the photograph and including the 'voices of the many.' In this respect they all share – to varying degrees – the cultural ambition and cognitive space of Ernst Friedrich's *Krieg dem Kriege* (1919), Vladimir Mayakovsky and Alexander Rodchenko's, *Pro eto* (1923), André Breton and Jacques-André Boiffard's *Nadja* (1928), and John Heartfield's and Kurt Tucholsky's *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles* (1929). The more general point, therefore, is that realism (understood as a form of ideological 'unveiling' and a metaphoric bid for 'totalization') and modernism (understood here as the ironization of photography's claims to transparency of meaning and truth and photography's necessary multiplicities of form) meet and interrogate each other. Indeed, after the Russian revolution this mutual interrogation represents a massive cultural shift in European and American culture, in which the influx of large numbers of workers into cultural production and artistic activity shifts the class composition and allegiances of modernism. As Henri Lefebvre said in the 1960s, this was the first time that the bourgeoisie 'lost control' of culture, insofar as a massive surge of energy from below proletarianized mass culture and modernism up until the outbreak of the Second World War.² This shift is easily misunderstood and exaggerated. In Europe and the US these changes did not equate to a socialist break with the dominant culture, and the main centres of bourgeois culture were not under new leadership. Instead, as Michael Denning has also argued in his important work on the cultural front in the US in the 1930s and 1940s (a period of extraordinary countercultural and counter-hegemonic inroads into the dominant commercial culture in the US), the post-Russian revolutionary period of cultural activity at this time represented a massive shift in power from below. Denning rightly argues that the bigger issue is not the rise and fall of 'engaged art' as

2 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* [1967], translated by Sacha Rabinovitch. London: Athlone Press, 2000.

a consequence of the (over-rehearsed) Manichean clash between Stalinism (populism and realism) and Trotskyism/left liberalism (modernism) in this period, but the new and expanded lines of connection and exchange between workers' politics with its collective culture and the new modernism, which allowed working class artists to participate in and reframe the emerging modernism, and for modernists to address the lives of workers and the legacy of realism. In this sense Denning recognizes that the progressive shift – as far as the US was concerned – was less specifically the advance of avant-garde ideas within the common culture, and more about the mass mobilization of energies from below as a transformative presence within this emergent modernism. The effect was to 'open up a politics of several levels of cultural work – movement cultures, experimental cultures, state-sponsored cultures, and the culture industries – that went beyond any of the left avant-gardes, including surrealism'.³ Indeed, in terms of the opening up of these links between workers and modernist modes, US culture at this time stands, along with Weimar Germany in the 1920s, as one of the most progressive periods of cultural activity under capitalist, mass cultural conditions. This is reflected in the extraordinary modes of documentary practice developed during this period (Living Newspaper, Newsreels, Workers Film and Photo League, proletarian fiction, photo-text books) in addition to the widespread incorporation of the 'document' (as 'readymade') into modernist fiction and poetry (for example, John Dos Passos, Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen). In this light, Denning argues, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to assume that the art of the 1930s produced under the 'cultural front' is dominated by an unthinking representationalism. On the contrary, the development of documentary modes was, in fact, a *modernist* response to the crisis of an older, already creaking literary social realism. The customary and sentimental attachments to the vicissitudes of working lives in this writing seemed feeble against the grotesquery, violence and speed of contemporary mass cultural capitalism. 'The cultural front was not characterized by an opposition to modernism; and the crucial aesthetic forms and ideologies of the cultural front were not simple representationalism.'⁴ 'The documentary impulse was a peculiarly modernist solution to the crisis of representation and narrative.'⁵ Indeed, the 'proletarian' movement in US theatre and the novel – in homage to early Soviet experiments – was an expressly avant-garde moment of assimilation of this grotesquery, which is why the effects of this counter-hegemonic cultural moment are so uneven. A huge amount of radical and dissenting work was produced; a huge amount of energy was released through grass roots cultural activities, but beyond the impact of a small number of films (*Citizen Kane*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) little of the activity found a mainstream audience, even in the area of photography, precisely because the modes of engagement with the social crisis were so formally unstable and unusual, and therefore unable to compete on the same ground

3 Michael Denning, 'The Success and Failure of the Cultural Front: Afterword to the 2010 Edition', *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* [1997]. London and New York: Verso, 2010. See also Andrew Hemingway, 'Middlebrow: For and Against', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

and to the same effect as the popular magazines, variety entertainments and Hollywood films. Many of the photobooks sold in the low hundreds, and various attempts to produce a popular, workers' illustrated magazine along the lines of *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, such as *Photo-History*, *Direction* and *Friday*, were short-lived, once the ideological highpoint of the Spanish Civil War was over. As such, the very real shift in the class relations of cultural production and reception needs to be squared – particularly in the area of photography – with the limits of the hegemonic scope of the new social modernism, given that works need institutional legitimation to find their way in the world, and this was in short supply on the cultural front.

Many of these ambitions and contradictions are perfectly embodied in James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). The work is an excellent example of plebeian social modernism: on the one hand, it reveals a passionate commitment to the representation of working class lives as part of the general de-legitimising thrust of the cultural front, but, on the other, it is also an extensive reflection on the problems and limits of representation itself. If many works from the period seek a point of mediation between the 'social' and experimental form, Agee and Evans' work is perhaps the most fastidious of these. Indeed, the meeting of documentary mode and modernism in Agee's text and Evans' photographs is highly self-conscious, even squeamish at times in the case of Agee's writing. And this is presumably why it sold so few copies when it was first published, and why it was poorly received, for its modernism seemed to sit incongruously with the authors' desire to expose the destitution of the rural working poor.⁶ Thus, the construction of documentary practice in the US may have been part of the broader emergence of social modernism, but the political demands of the time were unable to shape and sustain a progressive alliance between documentary modes and modernist form. This lack of political orientation is of course cemented in the ferocious attack on the cultural front by the American state after the Second World War as part of the anti-communist, Cold War drive. The productive links between modernism and realism, documentary practices and the post-Soviet avant-garde were sundered, as the cultural front was identified with a crude partisan representationalism and fellow-travelling Stalinism. When your organization is put on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations – as the Workers Film and Photo League was – it would not be surprising to see how quickly your view of modernism might change in order to distance yourselves from these alliances, enabling a version of modernism to flourish that was happy to say goodbye to the avant-garde *tout court* (as in Greenberg's 'neo-Trotskyism'). But if this became a frightened common sense notion after the Second World War, it was because the ground had already been well prepared. *The Partisan Review* made every effort to disinvest realism from the social crisis, particularly through the contributions of

⁶ Most of the first reviews of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, were respectful, even admiring of Agee's writing, but nevertheless, did not quite know how to locate it within the given parameters and expectations of the documentary culture of the time. See, William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Greenberg, who was eager to associate the cultural front with all things one-dimensional and fleeting. Greenberg's reduction of the complexities of the cultural moment in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) confuses the opacities and crudities of European Popular Front realism with a very different set of historical forces and cultural alliances operating in the US, forces which were certainly admiring of the anti-fascist mobilizations of the European Popular Front, but nonetheless did not imitate its cultural forms.⁷ Admittedly, in 1939 it was hard to map the various trajectories of the cultural front, or to make nuanced distinctions between it and the European Popular Front, even for someone as sharp-eyed as Greenberg. But even so, there is a lack of specificity to Greenberg's complaints about 'populism' that bypasses the multifarious achievements and energies on the ground. Indeed, Greenberg's Popular Front is a myth, a vacant space that many new-era American modernists were of course all too willing to rush into. As a result, Greenberg established an advanced outpost of what would become American modernism's exit from social modernism, and the basis for the freewheeling, pensive modernist spectator, which would do much to suppress the modernist origins of documentary-making during and after the Second World War, and give rise to John Szarkowski's formalism. We can see the beginnings of this trajectory in the response to Evans' work after the publication and MoMA exhibition of his *American Photographs* in 1938. His work was considered to have left mere documentary practice behind, or outplayed it – eluded it, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it – through the photographs' indifference to documentary coherence. 'By excluding words, and more importantly, by denying his reader the unities of time and place, Evans' rejects [this coherence] entirely. His sequences have nothing to do with chronology or place...[As such the] book also disrupts any expectation that its pictures of here and now must be "news"; that is, topical, or scenes of current events.'⁸ As such, Evans' images from this point on were rarely discussed in relation to the social modernism or modernist-realist literary expression that was to find its advanced form in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (specifically, the self-scrutinizing attention it gives to the ethical and epistemological problems of representing those who are without access to the power of self-representation). Indeed, after the book's publication, this delimited response to the political complexities of the moment became commonplace. This can be explained by the fact that the conventional documentary expectations of liberals, conservatives and radicals at the time were so strong that Agee and Evans were invariably represented as *failed* documentators. Because their work didn't mobilize opinion in any direct sense, the conservatives, liberals and radicals considered it unable to perform its own generic (realist) claims. And this of course suited conservative detractors of the documentary ideal, along with liberals and radical neo-Trotskyists, who were all keen to inflate artistic independence, above anything that smacked of Stalinist populism and socialist realism. Admittedly Agee doesn't help his case, and nor does Evans', who,

⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, vol. vi, no. 6, Fall 1939.

⁸ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Hill and Wang, Noonday Press, 1989, p. 252.

by the late 1930s, after his uncomfortable time in the Farm Security Administration (FSA), was beginning to construct an identity for himself as a 'maverick outsider'.⁹ In the 'Preamble' to the book *Agee* is pathologically uncertain in regards to the massive historical task he has undertaken with Evans, and, therefore, absolutely candid about the limits of his literary skills and truth-telling powers.

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odours, plates of food, and of excrement... As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live.¹⁰

Yet for all the text's confessional powers it accepts the ethnographic and political responsibilities of the witness: to speak with – to dialogue with – those are who are the chosen subject of representation, in order to best represent their interests. At an important level, this very vividly sets in place the defining epistemological gap between Western documentary practice's invocation of *realism-as-witness* and the Soviet *avant-garde's* invocation of *realism-as-praxis*: the former accedes (hesitantly) to the interests of the proletarian subject 'from above', while Soviet photography is engaged in a shared process of political transformation with the collective proletarian subject 'from below'. In the end, as the political conditions became increasingly unpropitious for any kind of witness-work 'from above' (certainly in the US in the 1950s) this division contributed to the later realist retreat of photographic modernism: namely, that there is no authentic 'collaboration' with the subject; no claims for 'totalization' that are not explicitly totalitarian; there is only the authenticity of drift, the pathos and difficulty of the photographer as silent sentinel.

Thus, the interrogation of realism by modernism in US and European documentary practice in the 1930s was conducted under quite different terms to that of the factography of the Soviet *avant-garde*. The prevailing question in European and US photography was: how do I tell the truth of a class I have no or little access to? Rather than, as in the Soviet Union: how do I extend the formal limits of photography in order to represent the revolutionary dynamism of the proletariat, of which I am a constitutive part? Nevertheless, what interests me is that the very asking of the former question puts in place a commitment to the rhetoric of the image, which, in turn, puts documentary interestingly at odds with any positivist model of photographic transparency. Consequently, the significant point is that the truth-effects of the photodocument at the point of the emergence of documentary as a concept is always sliding into a modernist critique of

⁹ Walker Evans, quoted in Trachtenberg, *ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰ James Agee, 'Preamble', in Walker Evans and James Agee, *Three Tenant Families: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1965, p. 13.

the limits of photographic transparency. This sets aside any easy recourse to the idea of 1930s documentary as the place where the truth-telling powers of photography are secured politically (and then later eroded, so to speak). As Agee wrote in his original 1939 preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

The effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense... Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided... [But] of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue... The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative... The text was written with reading aloud in mind. That cannot be recommended; but is suggested that that the reader attend with his ear to what takes off the page... It was intended also that the text be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident... This is a *book*, only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell.¹¹

This is a striking compendium of many of the strategies of *avant-garde* literary and photographic form of the period: an emphasis on 'totalization' through the accumulation of multiple detail (Rodchenko, El Lissitzky); the equivalence between image and text (or the intertextual exchange of photograph and text) (Breton and Boiffard); the idea of the photographic work as a continuous (filmic) sequence (Tretyakov); and the notion of the work as an unfolding collaboration between author and reader/spectator (Moholy-Nagy). In this respect, the book's bid for (failed) totalization necessarily takes on a complexly hybrid form: a highly wrought first-person phenomenology of rural tenant experience, combined with sociological analysis, biblical rhetoric, ethnographic and archival summaries, political reflections, illustrations of family records, poems, and a list of further reading, all prefaced with the recorded subjects as a list of *dramatis personae*, to produce a text which is closer to the multiplicities of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), and even Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) than it is to the cloying documentary sentiment of Caldwell and Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937).¹²

¹¹ James Agee, 'Preface', in Walker Evans and James Agee, *Three Tenant Families: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1965, pp. 12–14. The original project was commissioned by *Fortune* in 1936, but rejected by the magazine as too unwieldy and prurient.

¹² Indeed, we might say that the three great works of American literary modernism in the twentieth century, John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (1941) and Louis Zukofsky's life-long poem 'A' (1978) – written between 1928 and 1974 – incorporate the social particulars of the documentary tradition, within, and as the material of, the constellational ur-modernist form of *Ulysses* (1922). Moreover, Dos Passos and Zukofsky adopt the automatism and sequentiality of a modernist photography as constitutive of this literary constellationality: the representation of urban and industrial experience becomes equivalent to the notion of the repeated, discontinuous snapshot. In addition we also might mention Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923),

Realism against the index/the index against realism

So why is it so important to single out the family resemblance between some of the key moments of early documentary practice and the avant-garde literary tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s? Why do we need to evoke the likes of Walker Evans and James Agee to say the things we need to continue to say about the avant-garde, realism and modernism and the social ontology of photography? Well, I would argue that we need this continuity precisely because it tells us something about how easy it is to give the photographic document a passive role in photographic production once the photodocument becomes aligned with documentary as a formal category. This means, that, whatever work we might now want to do on the relevance of the photodocument and realism, we must do within the *predetermining* space of modernism. Or, to put it another way, there is no such thing as a unified documentary practice that once spoke of the photographic truth of things, or told the truth of things, unmediated by the requirements of modernism's ironic approach to meaning and truth and the multiplicities of form. There was, therefore, no photographic modernism of the 1950s and 1960s that 'rescued' photography from the anti-modernism of the documentary tradition as such (as John Szarkowski tries to do in lieu of Greenberg's 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'), in order to free us from the would-be tendentiousness of documentary practice. On the contrary, at the birth of documentary in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the new genre defined itself as photography precisely through the modes of modernism (even though various documentary practitioners and theorists at times believed otherwise, or disguised their debt to modernism for pragmatic reasons). This, in turn, has important historical and cultural ramifications for debates on digital practice, realism and the photodocument today.

The arrival of digitalisation and the critical displacement of the photodocument may have further weakened the role of documentary practice as *political culture*, but it would be wrong to assume that this heralds the final demise of realism, in as much as there is no Realism to supersede. That is, under the aegis of documentary practice, realism – understood as the truth-claims of the photographic index – did not exist at one point in all its political glory, and then, with the advent of the index's would-be displacement under digitalisation, come to a sorry end. This is because, firstly, the indexicality of the photodocument and realism as an epistemological category are not the same thing; and secondly, digitalisation is itself a form of displaced or *secondary* form of indexicality. Whereas photographs are the result of direct contact between object and sign, object and sign in painting and digital images are connected via another sign (the hand of the painter or digital artist), implying that all embodied signs have some indexical relationship to the world of objects.

the first important black modernist work (praised by Hart Crane and Alfred Stieglitz amongst others), which combines poetry, the fiction of report, sketches, and dramatic dialogue, to produce a version of modernist pastoral.

In his introduction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee doesn't talk about the photodocument in terms of the index, a concept that was not in common usage in photographic circles in the 1930s. But he certainly highlights a systematic interrogation of how photography both calls forth the referent, its sociality and truth (realism), and at the same time 'loses' it in the fading of this truth through the execution and reception of the image (modernism). This calling forth of the referent, would seem to be one reason why a defence of realism in photography is still a requirement for photographic theory, because – despite Agee's concerns over the ethics of his own particular intervention – it is precisely the way in which the index allows the photographer to 'bear witness' on the grounds of *individual testimony* – so elaborately and passionately staged by Agee and Evans – that distinguishes photography's 'primary' indexicality semiotically from painting and computer-generated images. The photograph-as-testimony invites us to say this 'happened'. Which is not to say that digitally manipulated images have an attenuated relationship to evidential truth, but rather that they are reliant on the pre-existing form of photography's direct indexicality for the content of their truth-claims. Moving beyond this dichotomy, we thus need a theory of the indexical primacy of the photograph. In this new theory, the defense of testimony-in-photography goes beyond a reified documentary practice of 'facts', or one that provides the 'first-person' data for modernism, and instead flows as 'fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue'¹³ – to quote Agee – into the critical and totalising claims of realism.

Modernism, testimony and the index

What I am claiming here is close to what Paul Ricoeur has argued in his defence of the primacy of testimony as the basis for historical practice. As he says in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004):

It is before someone that the witness testifies to the to reality of some scene of which he was part of the audience, perhaps as actor or victim, yet in the moment of testifying, he is in the position of a third-position observer with regard to all the protagonists of the action. This dialogical structure immediately makes clear the dimension of trust involved; the witness asks to be believed'. He does not limit himself to saying 'I was there,' he adds 'believe me.'¹⁴

¹³ James Agee, 'Preface', in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blaney and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004, p. 164.

The self-assertion and self-verification of the witness is obviously not the guarantee of the truthfulness of any testimony, but rather, as Ricoeur makes clear, the first step into a discursive space in which various witnesses and various testimonies confront and challenge one another. In this respect, the clash of testimonies opens the possibility of a public space for the *promise* of truth:

It is against this background that a critique of testimony is grafted to its practice. The witness anticipates these circumstances in a way by adding a third clause to his declaration; 'I was there,' he says, 'believe me,' to which he adds, 'If you don't believe me, ask someone else', said almost like a challenge.¹⁵

Of course the sceptic might want to challenge this no matter how many witnesses enter this space (as with Holocaust deniers, or those who believe that May 1968 was nothing more than a turbulent student uprising, and not a nascent revolutionary moment), but the testimony, in its flow into public discourse, is *in potentia* always a moment of either assent or dissent in regards to the universal. This in turn means that the testimony is never free, either before or after it flows into this public space, of the requirements of a theory of history. That which is spoken for, and spoken to, that which is recognized and reclaimed as worthy of fidelity against the loss of historical memory, are all circumscribed and mediated by historical knowledge. This is why the photodocument possesses a connection to verbal testimony that painting and computer generated images do not. In other words, the direct indexical relations of the photograph, for all their formal continuity with other kinds of indexes, possesses a quality of 'thisness', of existential proximity or propinquity to the world, that continues to distinguish photography as a place of historical recovery, intervention, interruption, violation and recall.

Most photographic theory after Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, however, has tended to move in the opposite direction.¹⁶ The history of this shift under the auspices of postmodernism and post-structuralism has generated much theory and has been widely reflected on, and it certainly doesn't need any additional commentary here and now. Yet, suffice it to say Barthes' late writing on photography – despite its (undeclared) debt to the modernist-realist phenomenology of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – is invidiously anti-historical. This has much to do with Barthes' own exhaustion or even boredom with the political and critical stakes of the index, which led him to leave the concept exposed in *Camera Lucida* to a crass subjectivity, which, unbeknownst to Barthes, would become one of the ideological props of postmodern phototheory, and then a mainstay of the current revival of photography-as-painting. Indeed, *Camera Lucida's* distinction between the *punctum* and *studium* has, in these terms, given photographic theory the licence to shift its ground from questions

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 164–165.

¹⁶ That is, with the major exception of Allan Sekula's writing. See in particular, *Dismal Science*, University of Illinois Press, MC, 1997. See also Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

of photographic veracity to the endless mutability of photographic interpretation. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued:

The real point of the *punctum* is thus that it turns the photograph from a representation – something made by someone to produce a certain effect – into an object – something that may well produce any number of effects, or none at all, depending on the beholder.¹⁷

But, as I have explained above, we don't need to forego veracity for interpretation once we accept that the indexicality of the photodocument is continuous with, but distinct from, other forms of indexicality. This means that we don't have to sacrifice the philosophical claims of realism for fear of supporting the idea of the interpretative transparency or objectivity of the photographic document, and hence the idea that conventional documentary practice is the sole, political guarantor of truth. On the contrary, by defending the dialectical repossession of the index-as-testimony, the photodocument is able to sustain an open relationship to the discursive, transitive and constructible claims of photographic realism, or the figural. And this is why the complex relations between modernism and realism, the photo-document and the post-Soviet avant-garde, in Evans and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is a good place from which to start to show why this is so.

¹⁷ Walter Benn Michaels, 'Photographs and Fossils', in James Elkins (ed.), *Photography Theory*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 440.

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In 2008 John Roberts was invited to give a lecture at MACBA in the context of the seminar *The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia*, which has been updated here.

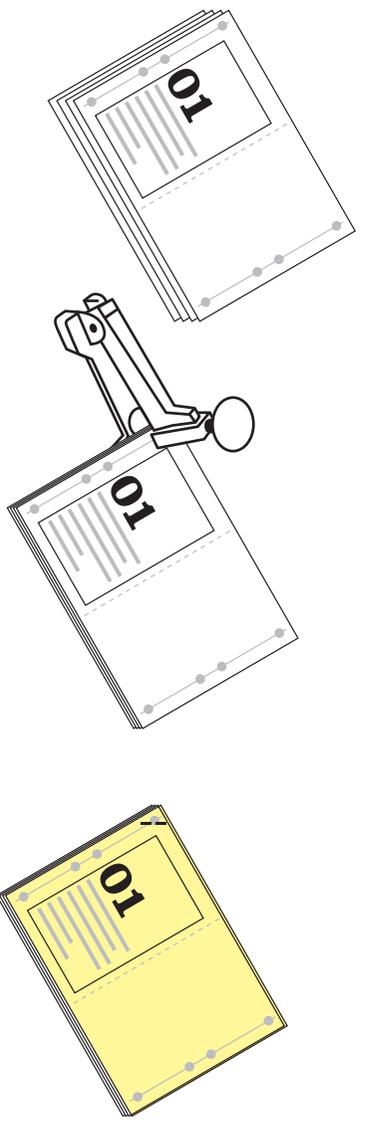
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portàtils

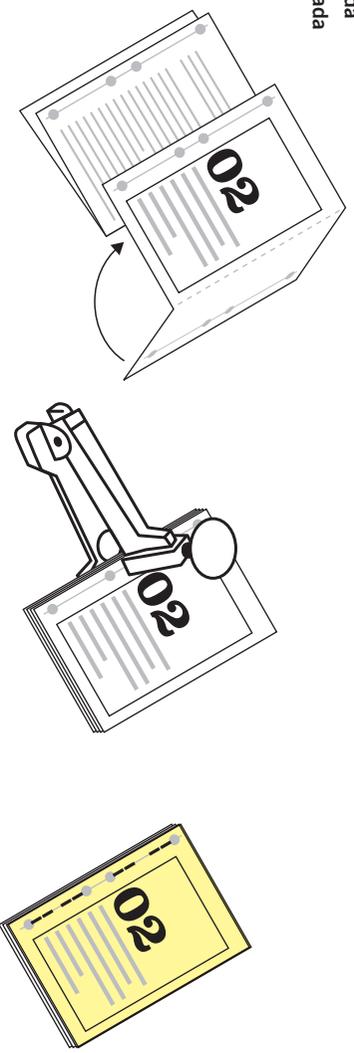


Tres maneres d'enquadrernar els teus Quaderns portàtils Tres maneras de encuadernar tus Quaderns portàtils Three ways of binding your Quaderns portàtils

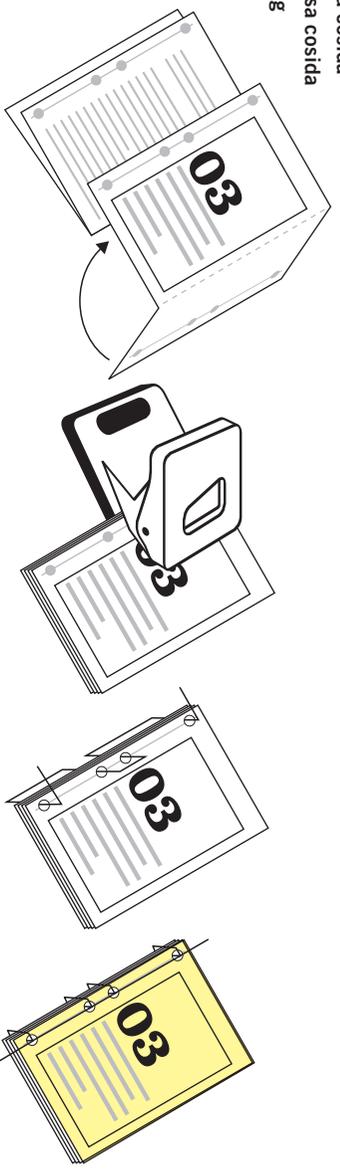
Dossier grapat
Dosier grapado
Stapled Dossier



Enquadrernació japonesa grapada
Encuadernación japonesa grapada
Stapled Japanese Binding



Enquadrernació japonesa cosida
Encuadernación japonesa cosida
Sewed Japanese Binding



Llenceu aquest manual d'instruccions una vegada utilitzat (no enquadrernar).
Desechar este manual de instrucciones una vez utilizado (no encuadernar).
Throw away this instructions manual once used (do not bind).