

# CATEGORIES AND COMPARISONS: HOW WE FIND MEANING IN PHOTOGRAPHS

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Photographers and social scientists share this problem: how to arrange large amounts of material (photographs or qualitative and quantitative social science data) so that they communicate the analyst's understanding of the situation studied to a reader or viewer willing to study the arrangement seriously? A comparison that will seem unlikely to most readers—between the making and reading of sequences of documentary photographs and the making and reading of statistical tables—reveals the crucial analytic role of the construction of categories of comparison by both the maker and reader of such representations.

Suppose that I have made a large number of photographs—a serious documentary photographer would make many thousands of exposures pursuing a big topic. I have edited them: selected those images I think best convey the ideas I have arrived at about my topic as I went about making them. How can I arrange all this stuff, put it together so that it communicates something I want to communicate to the people I want to communicate it to (and, of course, communicate what they want me to communicate well enough that they will pay attention to my work)?

Walker Evans had just this problem when he created *American Photographs* (Evans 1988 [1938]) from images he had made over a period of several years, all over the eastern United States, south and north (the farthest west he got was New Orleans): New York, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Alabama, and elsewhere. (Not all in the United States; you have to interpret the title generously, since three of the pictures were made in Havana). He wasn't completely clear about what he was after when he made all these pictures. According to a profound student of his work, Alan Trachtenberg, Evans was trying to answer the questions that the Great Depression had raised for a lot of American intellectuals:

What is special about the American people? What are their characteristic beliefs, their folk history,

their heroes, their work patterns, and their leisure? . . . Evans's concept of America cannot easily be defined by enlisting him in any particular camp, but it can be said that his work belongs within the general pattern of—the search for an authentic American culture and one's own Americanness. (Trachtenberg 1989: 247)

Another way of seeing Evans' intentions is to read the list of what he was after contained in the letter he wrote to a friend while he was making all these pictures:

People, all classes, surrounded by bunches of the new down-and-out.

Automobiles and the automobile landscape.

Architecture, American urban taste. commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful smell, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay.

The movies.

Evidence of what people of the city read, eat, see for amusement, do for relaxation and not get it.

Sex.

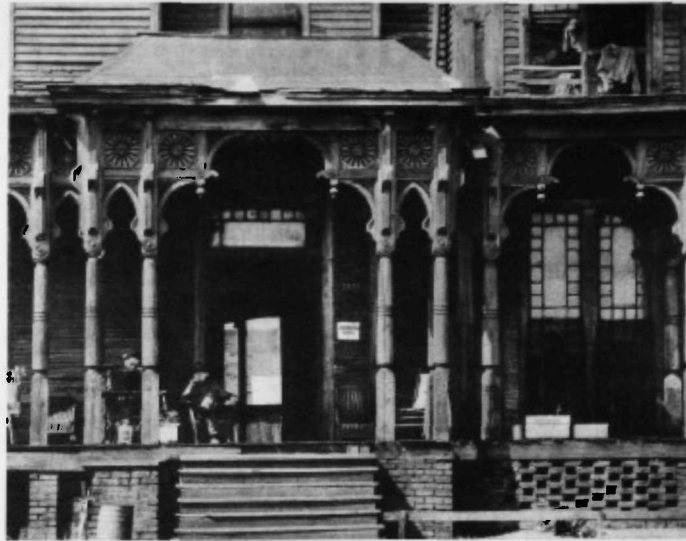
Advertising.

A lot else, you see what I mean (quoted in Trachtenberg: 244).

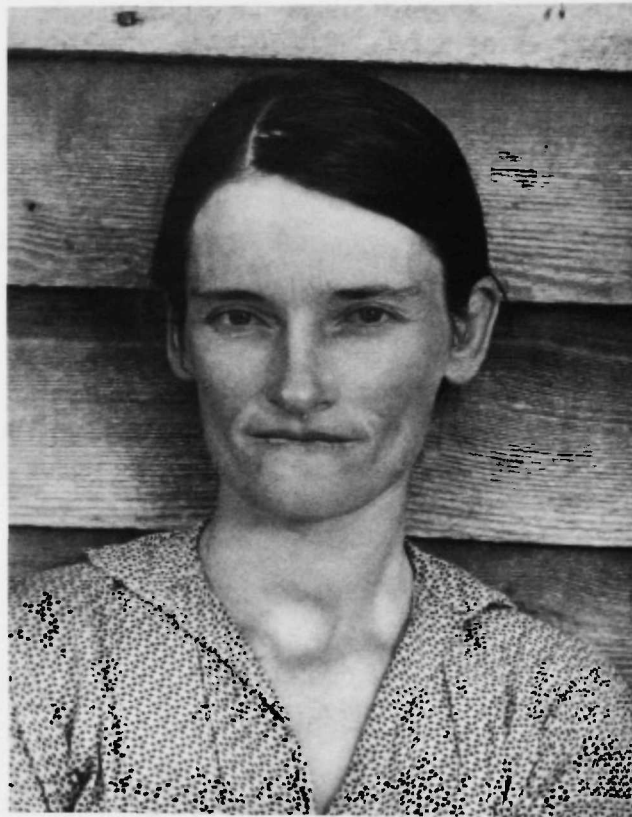
Evans' intuition, led by such concerns, produced the archive he had to work with. Out of it, he finally chose 100 pictures for his exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, and from those he took 87 to be included in the book which eventually became *American Photographs*. And, having made these choices, he now had an apparently simple problem: in what order should the images appear in the book?

Photographers usually think that this apparently simple problem is crucial and difficult. They understand that a single image is ambiguous. It does not easily and unequivocally reveal "what it is about." Pictures made for such purposes as news and advertising are

usually composed so as to definitively avoid this problem, by excluding all “extraneous” detail, everything except the “point” of the news story, or the feature of the product its advertisers want to call attention to. The surroundings of the central feature are carefully chosen to help “illustrate” the story or enhance the product’s appeal. (See (Hagaman 1993; Hagaman 1996)



Documentary photographers, however, don’t reduce the surroundings in that comprehensive way. Looking for photographic truth, they let what’s there be there. As a result, most pictures made as “documentary” purposely contain a large amount of “information,” all sorts of details that were in the area photographed, even when those details do not support any simple interpretation of what’s going on in the setting. And though these pictures are carefully composed so that the details are not just random noise, there is so much to look at that the overall picture can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on which details viewers (interpreters) emphasize and what they make of them. With all those bits of information, a picture will support more than one story, and certainly more than the simple scripts that inform newspaper stories and advertising spreads. So: how are viewers going to know what’s important, what the idea is, what the photographer had in mind, what they are “supposed to get out of this picture”? How can photographers arrange the pictures so that what they had in mind gets into the minds of the people who see their



work?

Ordinarily, a picture’s caption does that job. It tells us what’s important, points out what we should attend to and what we can ignore, explains how the elements of the picture are related. Some documentary photographers do help viewers along by providing extended captions (Dorothea Lange is an example) or, going further, they embed their photographs in a text made up of essays and interviews (Danny Lyon’s biker book (1968) is an example of that). Other photographers, however, and Walker Evans was one, leave their images verbally unadorned, except for a brief identification of the place the image was made and the date, and this has the effect Trachtenberg describes:

An uncaptioned sequence of pictures suggests a hidden author, one who keeps out of the reader’s way—like Flaubert or Henry James—but maintains a consistent point of view, a physical and moral perspective. The analogy cannot be exact, for what choice does the editor of photo-

graphs really have? Except for its denotations, what it is a picture of, a photograph can arouse widely varying interpretations, and thus, unless an editor anchors the image in an unambiguous caption, its meaning is too open and indeterminate to provide a reliably secure point of view. (251)

There is another way to indicate the image’s



meaning, however, what Eisenstein called *montage*. Again, Trachtenberg:

Any grouping of images within the book can be taken as an example of Evans' adaptation of the montage device, which can be restated as a dialectical process of thesis giving rise to counter-thesis, together producing as feeling and/or idea an unseen, unstated synthesis. Each picture discloses a link to the next, a hint or germ of an antithetical image to follow. The reader is expected to remember each image fully, in all its details and nuances, for the most inconspicuous details become significant in echoes and allusions further on. What the pictures say they say in and through the texture of relations which unfold—continuities, doublings, reversals, climaxes, and resolutions. (259)

That is, the image an image follows, the image it precedes, and those even farther away in the sequence of pictures the viewer sees—all those pictures condition our understanding of the picture we are looking at now. The meaning of any one picture arises in its connection with all the others.

The arrangement of images in a book, in Evans' book, helps us read what's in them. But how do we actually do that? How do we use the materials in a sequence of images to create our understanding of what they "mean," to arrive at an interpretation of the ideas

they convey beyond a mere listing of what's there?

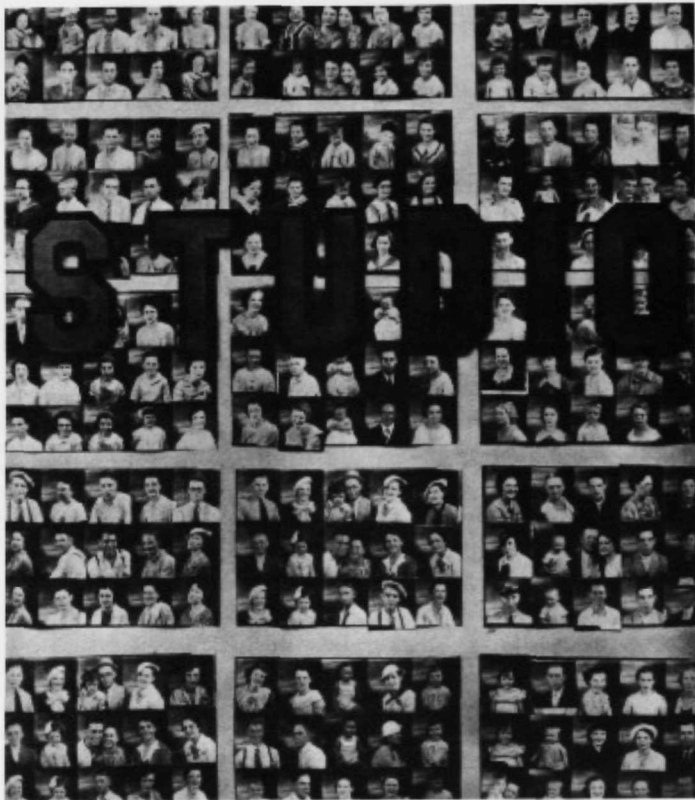
We do that by comparison. We look at two pictures together and see what they have in common, and we take that common feature to be, perhaps not everything the picture is about, but at least provisionally, one of the things it is about. We create, we might say, using the language Leonard Meyer (1956) and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1968), respectively, used about music and poetry, an hypothesis that that common feature is what these pictures are about. We of course test the hypothesis with succeeding pictures, as Meyer and Smith suggest we do in listening to each succeeding bar of music or reading each successive line of a poem. So we look at a third picture, seeing if it has the features our hypothesis about similarities suggests. When (as is usually the case) it doesn't do that exactly, but does do it partly, we revise our hypothesis, our notion of what the sequence is about, to take account of this variation. And so on, comparing each next picture, again and again, to what has come before, using our accumulated understanding of the similarities to arrive at an understanding of what the whole sequence is about.

We don't, of course, just find similarities. Since photographs contain a lot of detail, there are many things to compare and some of them are differences rather than similarities. We note the differences and see what we can make of them. Do they suggest a second theme? A variation on the first theme? Do we see a connection between the two themes?

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This is what Trachtenberg does with the first six pictures in *American Photographs*, explaining how the successive references to cameras and photographs and situations of photographing leads viewers to conclude, if their reading of similarities coincides with Trachtenberg's, that the sequence is about photography and image-making:

The movement from the opening picture through the second to the third encapsulates the method of the book: from a conception of the photograph as mere identification to a subversion of that idea in the second image (where "Studio" cues our response to the wit in the event: a single picture made of, and commenting on, many small pictures), to a picture free of writing and full of ambiguity, of the two boys looking elsewhere. Their glances beyond the frame of the image tell us that the world is wider and more full of circumstance than any photograph can show, that photographs cannot properly "identify" because they leave out too much, that reading has its limits and must take the arbitrariness of the picture's frame into account: an admission of contingency absent from the "studio" images implied or shown in the preceding pictures (264).



The subtlety of Trachtenberg's analysis shows what a sophisticated reader can make of a carefully arranged sequence of photographs. But there are two things to note about this kind of reading. One is that the reader must really be sophisticated, know how to "read" photographs. The other makes itself evident in an unlikely comparison, which I'll introduce shortly, to the reading of statistical tables.

A sophisticated reader of photographs, we might say, is a reader who does, consciously and carefully, what any ordinary reader of photographs does unreflectively and carelessly. A conscious and careful reading differs from an "ordinary" reading, first of all, in its deliberate thoroughness. We can guess that all viewers of a photograph respond, wittingly or not, to everything in the frame, are affected by the tonalities and composition, register the small details, but don't know that they are doing that. They just take a quick look, add it all up, and say, "Oh, yeah, that's striking or sad or it 'really captures' the essence of that thing." But they don't know what went into the adding up or capturing or just how these operations were conducted.

A conscious and careful reading, on the other hand, takes time. The viewer goes over every part of the picture, registering explicitly what's there, what point of view it represents (where the photographer put the camera in order to get that particular view, among the many that might have been chosen), the time of day, the things that were left out but perhaps hinted at by the framing of the image, and so on. The sophisticated viewer knows the photographer could have made, and perhaps did make, many other versions of the same material, in which all those things were different, and so reads what's in the frame as the result of deliberate



choices the photographer made which combine to produce the final effect. So a deliberate reader of photographs spends a long time on each image.

In consequence, a sequence of photographs only has the kind of meaning Trachtenberg teaches us to look for when the reader puts that kind of time into the consideration of every photograph and of the relations of each of the photographs to all the others. A book like *American Photographs* thus requires as careful a reading as a complex poem of similar length (Trachtenberg compares *American Photographs* to Eliot's "The Wasteland").

Now for the unlikely comparison to the reading of a statistical table. Tables give readers a lot of interpretive help. The statistician who prepares the table labels its rows and columns with the names of the categories of data it contains and the names of the subcategories into which those categories are divided. The grid constructed by putting two or more of these divided categories together (creating what statisticians call a crosstabulation) lays out all the possible combinations of these features, and the entries in the cells of the grid tell us how many of each kind there are.

The readers of such tables make sense of the numbers in them by comparing them with each other. They look at two numbers and ask: are these numbers the same or is one bigger than the other? And, if one is bigger, is the difference big enough to take seriously?



But the reader of a table, unlike the reader of a photographic sequence, does not have to create the categories of comparison. The person who prepares the table has done that analytic work already, just by labeling the headings of the rows and columns with such dimensions as age, sex, race, income, and education, to take typical headings. Differences along these dimensions are what we are to compare. Do people aged 45-60 earn more than people 30-45? Do blacks get less schooling than whites? Do women make less than men? The designers of tables worry about how to arrange the dimensions and numbers so that the important comparisons are easily accessible to a reader. (See the discussions by Tukey (1972) and Tufte (1983; 1990))

We can think of the sequence of photographs in *American Photographs* (and similar books) as something like the entries in a statistical table or grid, each photograph a piece of "data," a fact that we now have to work with. When we compare the images in a photographic sequence, however, we don't have the kind of help given by the headings of the table's rows and columns. No one labels the rows and columns for us. No one tells us what the important dimensions are, at least not explicitly. And, therefore, no one tells us what the range of possibilities along these dimensions is either. The viewer's analytic job is to find out what



those dimensions are, or what they might be or could be. And, therefore, what possibilities the version of life-in-society the photographer is telling us about contains.

Without the labeled dimensions of the table, we have to work out for ourselves that, by comparing images of two women made in the streets of New York, we can arrive at a conclusion about women's experience on those streets, and perhaps something more general about the lives of women, as those are embodied in just such moments on the streets. When we compare two images, our intuitive grasp of how they are the same tells us some of the dimensions of comparison, for instance, that women in New York are ill-at-ease and wary when they are on the streets. And our next thought is that these two women are alike in that way, the likeness emphasized by the similarity of their hats and furs, even though they differ in race, but are both very different from the country woman we have just seen in her plain dress, standing against the weathered boards of her house. That tells us that there are still more dimensions to be included in our thinking about women's lives. We can go on to compare these women to the men we see, the black man in Havana, for instance, who seems so at home, who does not find it necessary to be wary, in a similar urban mi-



lieu. And then, armed with those dimensions, we can inspect other images, about which it hadn't occurred to us to raise such questions, to see what they add to our understanding of the specific cases pictured, but also of the general ideas and categories suggested.

To put this in slightly different language. The documentary photographic image typically contains so much detail that a viewer can easily make a great many comparisons between any two such images. Not all of these comparisons will produce ideas that can be sustained over the course of a long sequence of images, hypotheses about what the sequence is about that hold up when confronted with the succeeding images. But some, and not just a few, will do that. These ideas will not be contradictory. They will be complementary, suggesting more complex hypotheses that link the subthemes the viewer can construct.

The first outcome of such a photographic analysis, jointly conducted by the photographer and viewer, might be that this single image tells us that this white woman, and perhaps all white women or all white women of a certain age and class, standing in the street in New York look like this, the "this" suggesting perhaps a mood or an attitude toward being in public and on display. When we see the next image, we not only conclude, provi-

sionally, that this black woman standing in the New York street looks like that, her own version of "like that," too, but we also make a comparison of the entries in what now look like two adjacent cells in a grid. We decide that the two have this look in common and that what they have in common suggests something about the way women feel they must conduct themselves in public in New York. And we might decide, looking hard, that the looks differ as well—that the black woman's gaze is perhaps more guarded—in ways that may be traceable to the differing social situations of black and white women. And we take those notions to other pictures in the sequence, and perhaps decide that being a woman in New York makes you hard in ways that living in Alabama don't, and vice versa. So the outcome is not just a list of things, but the grid of comparisons itself, the space defined by the intersections of all these possibilities and their interconnections.

In other words, we not only engage in an act of comparison, comparing the specific items of data, the individual pictures and what they tell us about a topic, which we can imagine to perform something like the function of the numbers in a table. We also construct the table itself, with its rows and columns and labels. Our analysis creates the dimensions of comparison. We have some help in this from the photographer, who composes the images so as to suggest some possibilities rather than others, and then arranges them in a way that hints, through the comparisons we have been discussing, at what the parameters of the table are or might be.

The multitude of details in the documentary image

gives viewers the material with which to construct not just one comparison of this kind. You can make more than one table, so to speak, out of a lengthy sequence of detailed photographs. There are many comparisons to make, many dimensions to explore, many stories to tell. We can, for instance, focus not on the women standing in the street, but on the streets themselves, and the way they look, and what they tell us about life in America. And that means that we will now include in our comparison all the images of streets in which no people appear, such as the haunting image of Main Street in Saratoga Springs in the rain. And that leads us to comparisons to other streets, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and in a variety of other towns, large and small.

So a well-made photographic sequence supports a very large number of comparisons and thus a large number of interpretations, which is why we can continue to attribute more and more meaning to what is, after all, a small number of images. And why it is hard—in fact, impossible—to settle on a definitive interpretation and why the book repays repeated readings as it does.

Does the order in which the images in a photographic sequence are presented matter? Photographers and designers and curators do spend a lot of time worrying about this, wanting to ensure that viewers see things in a specific order which will generate certain comparisons and dimensions and moods. The practical question here is not "What order should I put the images in to generate the effect I want?" but "What order can I get viewers to respect?" There's no way to make viewers of an exhibit see things in a particular order,



they just walk around. You can easily observe that some viewers of an exhibit, having come through the entrance, immediately start working their way around to the right, while others, with similar conviction, turn left. And readers just as often leaf through a photo book backward as forward. Photographic exhibits and books are not like movies or pieces of music, where viewers and listeners have no choice but to get it the way the author meant them to. So this may be a distinction without a difference.

Nathan Lyons has frequently distinguished a series, in which the order of the photographs is important, from a sequence, where it isn't. If what eventually matters are the reverberations between the photographs, which attentive readers, as Trachtenberg says, have stored up in their heads, then the initial order in which we encounter them may not, after all, be so important to our ultimate understanding of the work.

All the above, supposing it is accurate, should serve the two purposes of methodological and critical inquiry: on the one hand, to tell us what we were doing all the time, but perhaps hadn't thought out explicitly; on the other, to show how what we have been doing uncritically can be done intentionally and consciously. We can look at such sequences as *American Photographs* (or Robert Frank's *The Americans*) and make our comparisons self-consciously and systematically and thus understand better why they work the way they do, why we feel they tell us so much about the world we live in.

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**CAPTIONS:**

All the photographs are by Walker Evans and appear in *American Photographs* (1938). They are part of the Farm Security Administration archive in the Library of Congress and are dated 1936. Some of the photographs are directly referred to here, others are not. Those referred to here, but not shown, are not available for reproduction.

- pg. 2. Birmingham Boarding House; Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife.  
pg. 3. Garage in Southern City Outskirts; Sidewalk in Vicksburg, Pennsylvania.  
pg. 4. Penny Picture Display, Savannah, 1936; Faces, Pennsylvania Town.  
pg. 5. Roadside Stand Near Birmingham; Interior Detail, West Virginia Coal Miner's House.  
pg. 6. Frame House in Virginia; Two Family Houses in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; House in Negro Quarter of Tupelo, Mississippi.  
pg. 7. Birmingham Steel Mill and Workers' Houses; Roadside View, Alabama Coal Area Company Town.