

Analysis of documentary photos revises history

December 11 2007

By analyzing some lesser known photographs, taken by world famous documentary photographers, art historian Cecelia Strandroth relates a new history of the Depression Era in the United States. She will publicly defend her dissertation at Uppsala University (Sweden) on December 14.

Can documentary photographs be regarded as credible depictions of events in the world or are they rather staged representations of a special perspective? Do documentary photos take part in the struggle against injustice or are they in fact instruments of those in power?

These questions have been discussed intensively over the last few years and a particularly relevant in terms of the photographs that Cecilia Strandroth studies in her dissertation, taken during the 1930s by photographers employed by the Farm Security Administration, U.S. government authority.

The photographs are classics of the documentary genre. Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange's images of the suffering of destitute farmers in the American South have become part of the American national heritage. Today they are symbols of the Great Depression of the 1930s and are said to show the resilience of the American people. The country survived the Depression and went on to win World War II.

Cecilia Strandroth's dissertation brings to light another history of the FSA. By examining seldom studied photographs, she reveals a history of politics, marketing, and propaganda. The photographers were employed

to advertise the policies the Franklin D. Roosevelt pursued as president, the famous package of measures known as the New Deal.

“Rather than representing an idealistic depiction of the living conditions of the country’s poorest people, the FSA photographers were part of an effective marketing apparatus,” she says.

The negative charge of the word ‘propaganda’ and the persuasive function of marketing does not square well with the demands of the documentary genre regarding objectivity and authenticity. The dissertation shows that the political function of the FSA was written out of history in order for the project to be able to serve as a symbol and a national legacy. This was done by suppressing the images that make the marketing of the administration’s policies apparent.

“This is most clearly the case when it comes to the best-known FSA photographer, Walker Evans, who is seen today as one of the greatest American artists of the 20th century. Despite this status, much of his production for FSA has not received much notice,” says Cecilia Strandroth.

Her dissertation presents and discusses a large number of these photographs, many of which were never previously ascribed to Walker Evans.

Source: Uppsala University

Citation: Analysis of documentary photos revises history (2007, December 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-12-analysis-documentary-photos-history.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.