

AN ESSAY ON DOROTHEA LANGE'S "MIGRANT MOTHER".

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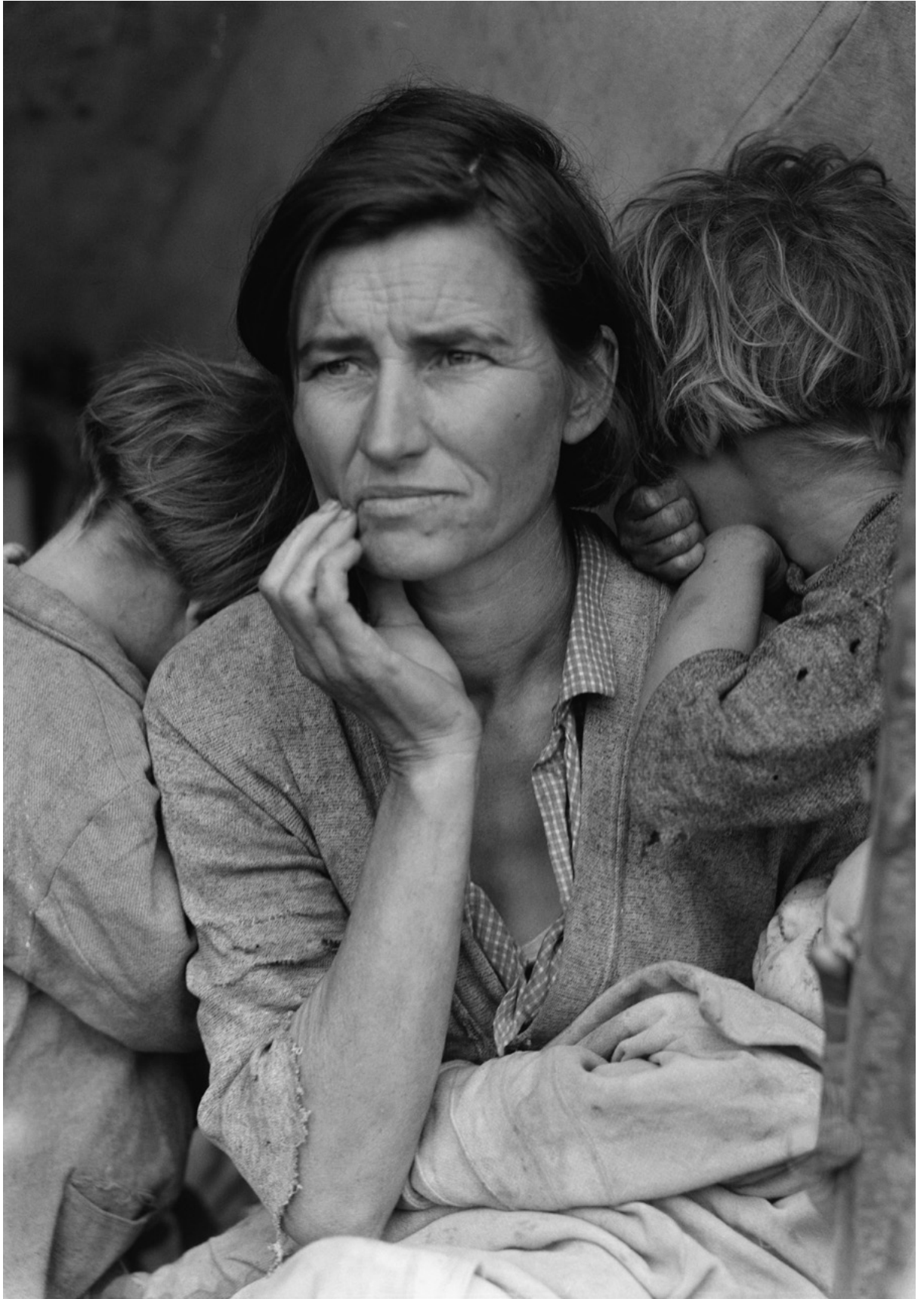
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ABSTRACT

In this essay on Dorothea Lange's well-known image, written for "The Politics of Seeing", David Company reflects upon the politics of imagery and its iconic status, arguing that the more they are seen, the more they are seen; and the more they circulate, the more they circulate – but the less they are understood. More often than not, photographs become iconic when they become default substitutes for the complexities of the history, people or circumstances they could never fully articulate but to which they remain connected, however tentatively.

Keywords: Photography; FSA; Dorothea Lange; Iconic imagery; Historical images.



"Migrant Mother" (1936), © Dorothea Lange

"Iconic" photographs have a kind of fame that is self-perpetuating. Like celebrities, the more they are seen, the more they are seen; and the more they circulate, the more they circulate – but the less they are understood. As their status grows, their meaning becomes vague, little more than the accumulation of clichés and received wisdom.

More often than not, photographs become iconic when they become default substitutes for the complexities of the history, people or circumstances they could never fully articulate but to which they remain connected, however tentatively. As with monuments to almost forgotten battles, they are symbolic placeholders, public markers for a missing comprehension. If any photograph deserves the mixed blessing of being described as "iconic" it is Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" (1936). It has become one of the most recognised and reproduced, with all the power and problems this entails.

In February 1936 Lange was travelling and shooting in central California on assignment from the US government's Resettlement Administration (RA, later known as the Farm Security Administration, or FSA). After a month away, she was driving back to her home in Berkeley when, near the town of Nipomo, she noticed a sign to a pea-picker's camp. Lange later recalled, perhaps with a little narrative drama, that she drove on for twenty miles until, "following instinct, not reason", she turned around. (Lange, 1960)

The recent pea crop had frozen and around 2,500 pickers were out of work, nearly out of food, and camping, in desperation. Although Government help was on its way, the situation in Nipomo was dire. Lange saw a woman seated before a makeshift tent with children around her. She took out her large-format (4x5 inch) camera, mounted it on its tripod and made seven exposures. It took less than ten minutes to take the photographs. Lange usually spent longer, talking with people and making notes. On this occasion she didn't even get the woman's name. Much of Lange's account of that day comes from an interview she gave 24 years later, to *Popular Photography* magazine:

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures [sic], working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it". (Lange, 1960)

For ethical reasons, Lange preferred not to photograph people unawares. Most often there was at first some kind rapport to be established. The resulting images could be described as collaborative, although the precise

nature of such collaboration can be too nuanced to define. Suffice it to say, the avoidance of the problems of candid photography in favour of a more participatory approach has its own challenges for the photographer, subjects and eventual audience. However closely we study the photographs, we shall never know exactly what went on between Lange and the woman and her children.

Back in Berkeley, Lange processed her film and made prints. She then contacted the *San Francisco News*, and on 10 March the paper ran a story titled "Food Rushed to Starving Farm Colony". The government had shipped 20,000 pounds of supplies to the camp. The feature was illustrated with two of Lange's photographs. What became her most well-known image was not used in that first publication. It did appear the next day however, in the newspaper's follow-up piece, "What Does the "New Deal" Mean to This Mother and Her Child?" There it was presented alone, setting the pattern for its countless subsequent presentations as an isolated symbol rather than as part of a larger piece of journalism. In general Lange made photographs to be used in conjunction with each other and accompanied by careful writing; coverage of a subject was more important than the making of emblematic images. In many ways this particular photograph, and its subsequent life, was an anomaly in her working practice.

Why are certain photographs chosen for publication over others? Why are some used as components of stories or photo-essays while others are singled out? With the expansion of the popular press in Europe and North America in the 1920s and '30s, conventions were soon formulated for photo-essays. Images were selected by an editor or art director from what the photographer or photo agency had supplied. Meaning would be constructed in the movement from one image to another, held together by captions and further text. But against this idea stood the singular image, which could be made to function in a more summary and immediate way within the quickening visual culture of the mass media. The documentary details of these isolated pictures could be made to serve wider ideas, extending meaning from the particular to the general.

Such pictures tend to be compositionally tighter, with a pictorial rhetoric or iconography connecting them to a longer history of representation. Indeed, most photographs that are labelled "iconic" tap into well-established visual tropes and conventions that pre-date the medium. By accident or design, or something in between, Lange's image fits within a familiar pattern of mainstream depictions of suffering women and children. With its classical form and clarity of gesture, traditionalists might claim there is thus something timeless and eternal being communicated by Lange's photograph, as if it encapsulated core and incontrovertible truths about motherhood, childhood and human nature. Praise for it often reaches for comparisons with Madonna and Child images from art history, invoking the supposedly sublime dignity of maternal pain in the face of adversity. The appeal is less to the sociopolitical circumstances of *that* particular woman and *those* particular

children on the ground, there in Nipomo in 1936, but to values that are presumed to transcend them.

Even the words "Migrant Mother" pull the image away from concrete reality into a more generalised realm. But photographs do not naturally possess titles or captions. They are thought up by the photographers themselves or people at the institutions that make use of photographs: newspapers, archives, picture agencies, publishers, museums. In photography's applied fields, such as journalism, images are given captions that often aspire to neutrality, or at least a non-specific authorship. Through the caption the institution "speaks" the image. As the cultural critic Walter Benjamin noted in the same year Lange took the photograph, captions "have an altogether different character than the title of a painting". They are to be found in illustrated magazines and they give "directives". (Benjamin, 1969, p. 226) Eight-by-ten-inch press prints of Lange's image were widely distributed for reproduction with the caption "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California", or "Destitute pea pickers in California; a 32 year-old mother of seven children. February 1936." But these were often discarded so that the photograph could be used for wider purposes. For example, on 30 August 1936, more than five months after Lange took the photograph, it was used by the *New York Times* as part of a less specific story about federal relief for California's fruit pickers. The newspaper's art department even removed the children from the image to isolate the figure of the woman, and she was captioned "A worker in the 'peach bowl.'"

It is only in the field of art, or Photography, capital "P", that titles are bestowed upon photographs. Titles help to shift the emphasis away from documentary specifics to aesthetic considerations and the achievement of the photographer. The subject matter is still present but is rendered less pressing as more symbolic or metaphorical readings are encouraged. It is not clear exactly when Lange's photograph was titled "Migrant Mother", but it was not circulated under that name by the RA or FSA, or the publications to which it was initially supplied. Even when it was given a full page in *US Camera 1936*, the high-profile and self-proclaimed annual of serious photography, it was given no title at all, just Lange's name and the image's technical specifications (Camera – 4x5 Graflex; Lens – Zeiss Tessar 7½"; Aperture – F.8; Exposure – 1/15 sec.; Film – S.S. Pan). (cf. Maloney, 1936)

In the latter 1930s the photograph was widely reproduced. In 1939 Lange and her husband, the sociologist Paul S. Taylor, published the book *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939). Lange's photographs were paired with quotations from the subjects and statistics gathered by Taylor. The already famous image was notable by its absence. It could be that it did not quite fit the aim of the book, which was to attempt to make a specific socioeconomic record of the movement of tenant farmers westward from land made unworkable by drought. It is also entirely plausible that Lange was aware that this image was different, both visually and through what it had already become in the hands of the media. It was too much of a showstopper, and difficult to integrate

into a book in which all the images and words were intended to work together. Such an emotive image would distract from the kind of civic consciousness that Lange and Taylor were hoping their book might help to activate.

With the arrival of the Second World War, media attention shifted to America's place in world affairs. But by the beginning of the 1960s there was a revival of interest in the American experience of the 1930s and in the visual culture it had left behind. Exhibitions, books, magazines and television programmes began to reuse the FSA photographs, cementing them in the popular imagination. Several of those images became synonymous with that decade, Lange's "Migrant Mother" prime among them. At the same time, photography was starting to gain a firmer footing both in art museums and university programmes. Having outlived their original purposes, documentary photographs were beginning to be collected and exhibited as signs of an era, or as great works by individual photographers.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a sophisticated language was emerging for the critical discussion of photography and its social functions. Higher-education media programmes were developing theoretical tools to think through the conventions by which documentary photography works. Central to this project was the simple but revelatory notion that despite being records of aspects of what was there in front of the camera, the meaning of a photograph is neither inherent nor fixed, nor is it determined by the photographer's intentions. It is largely a consequence of how and where the image is used. While "Migrant Mother" was being championed in the mass media as a landmark photograph with obvious and eternal values, it was simultaneously being put under a critical spotlight as an exemplary instance of semantic instability. The meaning of "Migrant Mother" migrates, and to grasp just how it does so requires an understanding of institutional and ideological power.

Images used within a framework of liberal reform or charity tend to depoliticise, sentimentalise, aestheticise and even victimise their subjects in the flattering appeal to the good nature of the more fortunate. But what would an image made in the name of revolutionary emancipation look like, and how would it be used? What would be the place of photography in collective politics? How different would this be from "Migrant Mother" and its uses? Or could such an image as "Migrant Mother" be used in other ways? As the American writer, teacher and documentary artist Allan Sekula (1978, pp. 859–883) put it: "The subjective aspect of liberal aesthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle. Pity, mediated by an appreciation of great art, supplants political understanding." A few years later, Sekula's contemporary the artist Martha Rosler (1981) noted: "Documentary photography has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics." The objections here were not so much against Lange herself – along with Walker Evans she was among the more politically astute photographers of the 1930s, well aware of how images

are susceptible to the values of those who might put them to work. Rather, it was those values that were coming under urgent scrutiny.

Thus, when students of photography encounter Lange's photograph it now tends to be within a framework of circumspect questioning. What is this image? What can we know from looking at it? What else do we need to know? In what different ways has it been used? How do text and context shape response? Why are women so often portrayed as timeless victims rather than as political agents? What happens when one photograph becomes so dominant in popular consciousness? What are the relations between aesthetics, ethics and politics? To what extent did the image result from collaboration between Lange and the woman and children? Moreover, the image has become something of a touchstone in discussions of image retouching. The thumb of the woman's left hand was visible in the bottom-right corner of the frame. She was gripping the upright post of her lean-to, possibly in order to help support the head of the young child in her lap. Some prints exist with the thumb clearly present, while in most it has been removed, although not entirely: a ghostly thumb remains visible. But it is still not quite clear why the thumb was such a problematic presence. What documentary code did it violate? Why was it improved by its removal? All these questions are now part of what Lange's image has become in popular discussion.

Today's magazines, newspapers and television programmes regularly run features about famous photographs. Tracking down and interviewing the subjects of familiar images makes for compelling stories, and the mass media is always happy to report on its own significance in the construction of collective memory. One of the first images to be revisited in this way was Lange's. In 1978 Emmet Corrigan, a reporter for the local California newspaper the *Modesto Bee*, located the "migrant mother". Her name was Florence Owens Thompson, a working-class woman now 75 years old. She was part Cherokee, a fact almost never mentioned when the image was published. Thompson was bitter about the experience and spoke of wishing Lange hadn't photographed her, of Lange promising not to publish the pictures, of not having been asked her name and of not making a penny from the success of the image. Thompson and her story went on to appear in further newspapers and TV programmes, and these in turn have become part of the way in which the career of Lange's image is today understood.

Dorothea Lange had died in 1965. Since she had been a government employee when she made "Migrant Mother", its copyright had been in the public domain from the start. Reproduction free of charge is one of the reasons for its promiscuous circulation. While it is undeniable that Lange benefited professionally from the reputation of the photograph, she made little direct profit from it. It would be another generation before the cultivation of a market in vintage prints and of record sales at auction. In 1998 Sotheby's in New York sold a print of "Migrant Mother" bearing Lange's handwritten notes for \$244,500. Its reproduction still costs nothing.

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