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**“Every feeling waits upon its gesture’: Eudora Welty’s “Snapshots” and the Art of Fiction”**

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In 1972 Eudora Welty, who had been publishing since 1941, was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters, after decades of accumulating honorary degrees, fellowships and literary prizes for her work, which (then) comprised four novels and four collections of short stories. In 1971 she had also become known as a visual artist, when her first photographic album came out, from a series of several others still being released by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; it was entitled *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: A Snapshot Album* (OT).

In the Preface, the artist contextualizes her photographic practice, referring to the historical circumstances and to the attitude that informed these images, taken during 1935 and 1936 while she was working as a publicity agent for the Works and Progress Administration (WPA), part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Welty emphasizes her freelance status, but nevertheless expresses her gratitude towards the WPA for “the blessing of showing me the real State of Mississippi, not the abstract state of the Depression” (7).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Preface this “real” quality of the photographs will be foregrounded, in implicit contrast to the “abstract” (or ideological) approach typical of American photography in the thirties.

Interestingly enough, documentary photography also claimed the authority of a truthful historical and social record, in the photographic tradition dating to the Civil War (with the work of Mathew Brady) and continued by Lewis Hine at the turn of the century. Indeed, although under the auspices of the FSA (Farm

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<sup>1</sup> Eudora Welty, Preface to *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: A Snapshot Album*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002). All further page numbers refer to this edition.

Security Administration),<sup>2</sup> a government sponsored agency, photo-journalism of the thirties purported to offer unmediated access to experience and to depict “the ordinary man,” in a decade when the nation was questioning its identity and the (un)fulfilled promises of the American Dream. As several critics point out, this penchant towards symbolism tends to reify the subjects, appropriating them as icons of “an assumed universal condition.”<sup>3</sup> In “Surveyors and surveyed: Photography out and about,” Derrick Price sums up the paradox evident in the effort to individualize the faces of the Depression (feeding an urban voyeuristic audience), while at the same time presenting them with a visual rhetoric alluding to the idealistic myths of the American culture: “these photographs are treated as historical, but timeless; densely coded, but transparent; highly specific, but universal.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best known example of American documentary photography from the thirties is Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” (1936), a close shot that excludes contextual detail, separating the group from their actual living conditions and accentuating the quiet desperation in the destitute woman’s face (see picture 1). The account provided by Lange about this “special assignment,” in an essay written in 1960, may sound a bit predatory nowadays:

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, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her her name or her history.<sup>5</sup>

The same detachment is shown by Walker Evans in his portraits of farmers taken in Alabama during the summer of 1936 and published five years later with a text by James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the FSA work consult Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Lawrence King, 2002), 281-287 and 290.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Derrick Price, “Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About,” in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 1998), 65-115, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Lange, “The Assignment I’ll Never Forget,” quoted by Derrick Price and Liz Wells, “Thinking about Photography,” in *Photography: A Critical Introduction, op. cit.*, 9-64, 39. For a detailed interpretation of this photograph and its impact in 20<sup>th</sup> century American visual culture, *idem*, 35-45.

Evans poses his subjects facing the camera frontally and underscores their helplessness in the face of the hard circumstances that transcend them, begetting a nostalgia for a mythic American past rooted in the pastoral ideal politically conceived by Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt (see picture 2).<sup>6</sup> Agee's lyrically charged prose idealizes the heroic struggle for survival epitomized by these model farmers, betraying at times a voracious fascination for facts in the effort to provide a veracious account. The text follows Evans's compact group of images, accorded autonomy by this editing strategy that contradicts the caption effect of photo-journalism, with the implicit subordination of the photograph to the piece of news it illustrates. The dynamics between visual and verbal texts is enriched by the photographic syntax that moulds at times Agee's narrative essay, structured in visual planes around an encyclopedic enumeration of details.

The fact that Lange and Evans were documenting the poverty stricken South at about the same time as Welty provides an impressive contrast to the methods and philosophy that inform her photographs. First of all, the inexperienced and shy Welty was at home, "moving through the scene openly and yet invisibly because (...) part of it, born into it, taken for granted," as she describes in the Preface to OT (9). The fact of being so well positioned freed her from sentimental stereotypes about the South and allowed her to establish an emotional bond with the persons photographed.<sup>7</sup> Besides, in contrast to the static, white "deserving poor"<sup>8</sup> portrayed by the FSA, Welty focuses mainly on the black community, engaged in their daily interactions.

The intrusive moves and the close range shot of the documentary photographers gives way in OT to an oblique approach that barely raises the attention of the persons photographed, or merely their "peripheral awareness" (*idem*). But most

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<sup>6</sup> Vide Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 164-165.

<sup>7</sup> As Welty explains in *One Writer's Beginning*, her autobiography published in 1984, both her parents had come from northern states, which granted her a critical distance towards the Southern ways of life, while the fact of having been born in Mississippi allowed her to hold the perspective of an insider.

<sup>8</sup> The expression, underlying the ethical basis of the FSA approach, comes from Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Deck: Essays on Photographic History* (1991), quoted by Derrick Price and Liz Wells in "Thinking about Photography," *op.cit.*, 40.

of the time Welty would ask permission to use her camera and urge people to “[go] with what they were doing” (*idem*), or she would establish stronger bonds, for instance participating in and recording religious ceremonies, or paying homage to friends in the local black community through both photographs and texts. Such is the case of Ida M’Toy (see picture 3), a retired midwife dealing with second hand clothes, who appears twice in the Portrait section of OT, having already been the subject of an inspiring piece which partly reads as an ekphrastic exercise upon these pictures:

When she stalks about, alternately clapping her hand over her forehead and flinging out her palm and muttering “Born in this hand!” as she is likely to do when some lady of old days comes in bringing a dress to sell, you cannot help believing that she sees them all, her children and her customers, in the double way, naked and clothed, young and old, with love and with contempt, with open arms or with a push to the bar of the door.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the images in OT seem to have sprung from Welty’s vocation as a storyteller, which is suggested by the Preface detailing the circumstances of several of the photographs. The structure of this album, organized by reference to the days of the week (“Workday,” “Saturday,” “Sunday”) further evinces this narrative penchant, also evident in some of the titles provided for the photographs, beginning with the infinitive (“To all go to town,” 52) or the gerund (“Making a date for Saturday night,” 66), supplying the contextual motivations for the actions depicted (“Carrying the ice for Sunday dinner,” 101) or provoking curiosity about the subject’s designs (“In the bag,” 63).

Welty repeatedly emphasizes her closeness to the figures that constitute this photographic universe and classifies OT as a “family album”:

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<sup>9</sup> Eudora Welty, “Ida M’Toy” (1942), *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, (London: Virago, 1987), 336-348, 345. Interviewed in 1989, Welty declared to have kept her friendship with Ida till her death in the sixties and to still spend time with one of her granddaughters, “Introduction: Eudora Welty and Photography: An Interview,” *Photographs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xiii-xxvii, xxvii.

The book is offered, I should explain, not as social document but as a family album—which is something less and more, but unadorned. (9)

As Maggie Humm argues in *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*, “[t]he conventions of domestic photography involve physical proximity in narratives of friendship,” foregrounding the ephemeral gestures of daily life and “[blurring] the [Modernist] distinctions between amateur and artist, and between art and the everyday.”<sup>10</sup> Another aspect of this type of personal photography is the peculiar relationship the images establish with time, preserving apparently random events as tokens of memory that establish the “presentness” of a familiar past,<sup>11</sup> allowing the symbolic reenactment of memory. The term “snapshot” chosen by Welty to classify her photographs underscores this mnemonic quality and the spontaneity involved in the choice of subject matter, asserting also the attentiveness to the world required to rescue from oblivion the “decisive moment” (as Cartier-Bresson would have put it). On the other hand, the semantic resonances of this term call to mind an amateur status and testify to Welty’s proverbial modesty, since she actually did some professional photography in her early years.

In 2002, on the occasion of the exhibition *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty among Artists of the Thirties*, held at the Mississippi Museum of Art, Suzanne Marrs published a valuable essay that testifies to Welty’s career in the fields of visual and verbal arts.<sup>12</sup> In “Eudora Welty’s Enduring Images: Photography and Fiction,” Marrs brings to light some interesting biographical facts concerning the artist’s photographic practice, such as the two exhibitions of her work by small galleries in New York (in 1936 and 1937), or the seven photographs published by

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<sup>10</sup> Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 219 and 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Marrs, “Eudora Welty’s Enduring Images: Photography and Fiction,” in *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty among Artists of the Thirties*, René Paul Barrilleaux, ed., 9-31, (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2003). For extended comments on Welty’s writing and photography consult also Suzanne Marrs, “Eudora Welty’s Photography: Images into Fiction,” in *Critical Essays*, W. Craig Turner and Lee Emling Harding, ed. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), 280-296.

the magazine *Life* (in 1937 and 1938). In addition, she stresses the artist's efforts, as early as 1935, to publish "Black Saturday," a selection of her photographs and short stories, some later included in *A Curtain of Green and other Stories*, her first collection of short fiction that came out in 1939. In an interview related to the release of her second album of photographs, the author evokes this project and comments that the combination of pictures and stories was a strategy to interest publishers in the book. Then she adds:

I got a composition ring book and pasted little contact prints in what I fitted up as a sequence to make a kind of story itself. I used the subject of Saturday because it allowed the most variety possible to show a day among the black and white people (...). I submitted along with the pictures a set of stories I had written, unrelated specifically to the photos, except that all were the South.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noticing the autonomy attributed to the photographs and to the literary texts, combined on account of the cultural context shared by both the visual and the verbal components of a book whose unifying theme would be the South.<sup>14</sup> The pervading presence of her native state in all her art work is indeed one of Welty's distinguishing features, although her humanist vision transcends regionalist distinctions. Furthermore, in the project "Black Saturday" the photographs are structurally arranged to motivate an exegesis based on narrative principles; they work as "slices of life" that connect sequentially and tell "a kind of story itself."

This crossing of boundaries between the rhetorics of photography and fiction will surface again in the essay "Place in Fiction" (1956), which appropriates optical lexicon to describe the literary correlation of place and creativity ("place can

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<sup>13</sup> Eudora Welty, "Introduction: Eudora Welty and Photography: An Interview," *op. cit.*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>14</sup> The thirties testified a new editorial trend in America: the combination of text and photography in albums such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), resulting from the joint efforts of the photographer Margaret Bourke-White and the neorealist writer Erskine Caldwell. Welty's project differs radically from these books on several points: the photographs were not illustrative and had a proto-narrative structure of their own; the work was not political in intention. For a consideration of several of these photo-textual albums consult Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, *op. cit.*, 283, 285, 288-289.

focus the gigantic (...) eye of genius and bring its gaze to point”), and to define the instrumental use of point of view (“Place, to the writer at work, is seen as a frame. Not an empty frame, a brimming one. Point of view is a sort of burning-glass, a product of personal experience and time”).<sup>15</sup> Besides, many scenes in her verbal texts are composed as “visual segments,” obeying the laws of perspective and vivid with minute detail, while at the macro structural level her fiction privileges a spatial coherence and a fragmented chronological line.

Additionally, the humorous tone that acknowledges in Welty’s fictional world the absurdities and joys of life may also be found in a peculiar group of photographs staged by the artist and her friends in the early thirties. When confronted with the comparison to Julia Margaret Cameron’s “tableaux vivants,” Welty commented: “Oh, they were high-minded. I think they belonged to the Rossetti period, taking themselves seriously as art.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, she underlines the playful attitude of the group and their parodic intentions: “we were satirizing the advertisement game. (...) A lot of it came out of our admiration of the smart world, our longing for the artistic scene we were keeping up with: the theatre, art, and music. We’d all been to New York.”<sup>17</sup> While denying the group’s artistic intentions, Welty actually highlights the creative ironic dialogue established with the cultural discourses emanating from the American establishment.

One of these photographs is entitled “Helena Arden” (a combination of the two leading American cosmetic brand names at the time) and features Welty – face slightly turned from the camera’s “gaze” and blurred in soft focus, quoting the visual conventions of the pictorial photographic movement (see picture 6). In the foreground stands a sharply-focused row of cleaning and grocery products, namely the Campbell’s soup can immortalized by Andy Warhol three decades later. The allusion to the overflow of manufactured goods typical of Pop Art parodies the superfluous needs and desires inscribed in daily life by advertisement and hints at the reification of the female body by the cosmetic

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<sup>15</sup> Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” *Stories, Essays, And Memoir* (New York: Library of America, 1998),

781-796, 787 and 788-789.

<sup>16</sup> Welty, “Introduction: Eudora Welty and Photography: An Interview,” *op. cit.*, xxi.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*

industry. Moreover the strategy of collage that mixes photographed material with text elements presented as typographical blocks calls to mind the work that has been developed by Barbara Kruger since the eighties, which also questions the deceptive transparency of media images and the ideological implications of visual signs (see picture 7).<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, I would like to highlight the common epistemological stance in Welty's visual and verbal work. As the Preface to OT testifies, the artist considers the camera an instrument that yields a version of reality, informed by the photographer's intentions: "The camera I focused in front of me may have been a shy person's protection (...). It was an eye, though—not quite mine, but a quicker and unblinking one (...). It was what I used, at any rate, and like any tool, it used me." (11). Her fiction also presents knowledge as provisional, a sort of cyclical process that undoes previous hypotheses before they should falsify our grasp of reality, conceived as a flux of joy and sorrow, echoing the main philosophical principles of Buddhism.<sup>19</sup>

The textual surface may seem unproblematic at first, but the realistic mode will become intricate by the subjective perceptions of the multiple focalizer characters, namely in the short story cycle *The Golden Apples* (1949). This tension between visibility and legibility is also evident in Welty's photographs when she chooses to privilege the "invisible" southern black community, "hidden in plain sight."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in her fiction Welty refers metaphorically to the technical aspects of the photographic process itself as a figuration of the enigma at the heart of reality. Through verbal images that transmit the confluence of

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<sup>18</sup> On Kruger's work consult: Ika Becker, "Who's Talking" in Uta Grosenick, *Women Artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 112-115; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 382; and Linda Hutcheon, "Text/Image Border Tensions" (ch. 5) *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 114-136.

<sup>19</sup> In *Eudora Welty: Two Pictures at Once in her Frame*, Barbara Harrell Carson suggests that Welty developed in her fiction a holistic vision close to the Eastern mystical traditions, (New York: Whitston, 1992), xxii.

<sup>20</sup> In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women Writing, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger comments on the effect provoked by the naturalization of the racial interactions in Southern culture, arguing that fiction written by women from this region explores "the structure of what is known but not thought, a misrecognized or fading epistemology—a cloud of unknowing that extends over everyday racial interactions.," (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 104.

opposites, the transformation or simultaneity of light and shadow,<sup>21</sup> the author alludes to the light imprinted photographic negatives and to the printing of the final photographic image, a work she used to do herself.<sup>22</sup> Thus, both photography and fiction reveal unexpected angles of the “family of men”<sup>23</sup> in its journey through life, as Welty declares in the Preface, once more recognizing the similarity between the two artistic mediums in which she was gifted:

The human face and the human body are eloquent in themselves, and a snapshot is a moment’s glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling. Every feeling waits upon its gesture. Then when it does come, how unpredictable it turns out to be, after all. (12)

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<sup>21</sup> Pedro Miguel Frade alludes to the impact provoked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century culture by the fact that the photographic process (tentatively named *skyagraphic* by Talbot, from the Greek *skya*, darkness) technically transformed light into shadow, reversing a main conceptual metaphor of western thought, *Figuras do Espanto. A Fotografia Antes da sua Cultura* (Porto: Asa, 1992), 72-73.

<sup>22</sup> In the Preface to OT, the author declares: “It was after I got home, had made my prints in the kitchen and dried them overnight and looked at them in the morning that I began to see objectively what I had there.” 11.

<sup>23</sup> I am alluding to the monumental photographic exhibition *The Family of Men*, curated by Edward Steichen and held in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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