

An Unfamiliar Lens

Project Agents: My Camera, **Walker Evans' Camera**, Antonio Castellucci Sua Moglie Maria Fanella

The agent which I have identified as unfamiliar, Walker Evan's camera, is also the primary agent through which my fabric is experienced. Walker Evans (1903-1975), a depression-era American photographer, is the photographer behind the photo *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania* which serves as the fabric through which my three conditions are understood, and it is Evan's camera through which my fabric is understood. As mentioned in my Agent 1 analysis, since Evans' framing of the space within the fabric (Evans' photograph) primarily dictates our interaction with its conditions through an unfamiliar agent (Evans himself), we are viewing the space according to how he wanted us to see it. Evan's photo (1935) was taken during his tenure with the New Deal *Farm Security Administration* (1935-1937), in the midst of the Great Depression. As FDR headed a robust effort to stimulate job growth, the government sought to hire professionals of all walks, laborers, and artists alike. As Evans fits into the picture, his task was to assemble a photographic campaign shining a light on scenes of everyday hardship in America in its various manifestations. It was part historical preservation, capturing the zeitgeist of the Great Depression, and part artistic commentary on human nature and human resilience. Evans is quoted with having the mantra "Stare. It is a way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long.", and in *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania* we see that illuminating stare beginning to reveal a narrative amid an assembly not of people, as in his more famous work in the FSA, but of space form. Without relying on human expression to convey a message (as many of his more notable works feature), Evans utilizes the absence of human life to convey a narrative of industry and abandonment, and instead relies on spaces and forms—specifically his composition of them within the frame (his camera as an Agent through which a space is experienced)—to tell the story.

Congregation

My selection for a condition of congregation within Evans' photograph is St. Michael's Cemetery whose headstones make a **prominent fixture** in the foreground of Evans' photograph. The graveyard exhibits, as a space, the condition of congregation in both the **proximity and repetition of its form**. In the narrative of Evans' photography, the headstones, specifically the large crucifix headstone, convey an unmistakable **message of death in the symbology of their form**. Additionally, a crucifix headstone, as opposed to **standard arc-topped** headstones communicates faith, as well as eternal life in the context of

Christianity. Evans' composition conveys desolation and abandonment, recurring themes in the Great Depression, **with the seeming absence of life** (we can see upon close inspection that a woman on her porch barely makes it into the bottom left of the frame, and a figure is blurred atop the roof of the house). The resulting effect of this black and white (a 7 11/16 x 9 9/16") is one of silence and contemplation in what should otherwise be a bustling industrial town of opportunity. Walker shot exclusively in Black and White at this point in his career (he once wrote in an essay that "color photography is vulgar"), and in a photo such as this we can imagine how significant clarity of Evans' message would have been obscured were it shot in color. The bleakness and drama of the photo are of course accentuated by the absence of color, but it also introduces the theme of a polarized gradient which I previously tried to establish in which the **grave represents one end of the spectrum** (fittingly, here, the color white, or all that is light) and the blast furnaces the other (fittingly, here, the color black, or all that is dark), with residence as the midpoint between the two (the color gray, or the mediator of the two opposites). The slope of the terrain in the graveyard reveals that Walker stands atop a hill, and we begin to feel that the **large crucifix headstone competes with the mighty furnaces** below in its modest size but powerful symbolism, and powerful its stature in the scale and hierarchy of the photo. In my visitation to the cemetery, **I have been unable to locate the large crucifix which stood in the frame nearly a century ago**. The absence of the cross would have made for an entirely different feeling photograph, and so my attempts at recreating Evans' shot results in a very different and less evocative image. With headstones toppled, and some apparently missing, the graveyard's form conveys a sense of ruin to my camera, but the relative maintenance of St. Michaels that we see through Evan's camera reveals one of greater order—the site exudes order and significance in its **complicated, organized form**. Still, however, the graveyard is not a citadel for organization, as we see evidence of recent abandonment in the slight overgrowth of grass.

Residence

The absence of life in the photos (again, discounting the 2 figures who play a virtually insignificant role in the composition of the piece) creates a powerful image for what should otherwise be a place where life is abundant. To Evans' camera, the 1000 housing block appears starkly **desolate, and even vacant**. Without formal indications of life (decorations or porch furniture) the units appear vacant. Without human life, the houses no longer communicate family, security, or refuge; instead, they appear meaningless, and dysfunctional (as in unable to serve the function they were created for as buildings for dwelling). With the sense of dysfunctionality established, the **façade seems just as superfluous as the**

structure itself. In Evans' photo, the façade feels like a distraction from the emptiness of the buildings, like an attempt to mask a difficult reality—it seems the façade is trying to mask the buildings emptiness by filling in the void with superfluous detail (the corbelling, the cornice, the extruded façade, etc.). The emptiness of the porches is particularly unsettling. While it would be understandable to not see people on their porches in November (though it clearly was not cold enough to deter the lady barely in the frame from sitting on the porch in short sleeves), the lack of furniture, plants, equipment (perhaps a bicycle at least), or decorations (banners, flags, windchimes, etc.), seems evidence of vacant houses, and the lone welcome mat is as eerie as it is unwelcoming. From Evans' point of view, it almost appears as if the cemetery has more life than in the house between its growing grass and the evidence that life has in fact visited the site (areas of cut grass, flowers on graves). The residence feels more insignificant than ever, as though acting as a barrier between the two places of greater symbolism—tying into my previously mentioned point about residence acting as the gray point on the black and white gradient of the grave (white) and the stacks (black).

Conflict

The theme of abandonment and desolation in Evans' photography as a social reference point for the Great Depression is continued in his camera's capturing of the Blast Furnaces. The silence and stillness of the photo is realized in the absence of smoke billowing from the furnaces. Smoke billowing would represent conflict for a number of reasons which I outline in my theory of the furnaces as the place of conflict (conflict of laboring for subsistence, conflict of nature and industry, conflict of heat and transmutation etc.), but here the absence of smoke takes on another conflict. That conflict is, as Evans is likely trying to capture, one of joblessness, and the absence of prospects for a better life. Things appear... stuck, as though frozen in time. Graves are filled, houses are vacant, and furnaces lie dormant. Here, the figurative heart of the city, the industrial center pumping life into the veins of Bethlehem is frozen in a moment in time, as all photography inevitably does, in which that heart is not beating. To further the analogy to an architectural application, the furnaces are the hearth of Bethlehem (the condition which served, according to Semper, as the center of the home by which all gathered) which the community gathered around, communally tending its flames, and relied on for their own survival. Now, the hulking size of the furnaces takes a different formal quality as it is no longer massive in its pollution of the environment, but massive in its hoarding of potentially productive space, still a form of conflict with the environment. Now, their massive shape represents not the inhuman size of industry, but the colossal burden left on us by our predecessors when monuments of human industry outlive their

purpose and crowd our changed world. The conflict of obsolescence comes full circle between Evans' photo of dormant furnaces, and the current state of indefinite dormancy that my camera finds them in. The furnaces' hulking size becomes a conflict in the tremendous void they leave on Bethlehem, as I ended my previous analysis by saying. The momentary inactivity of the furnace captured in Evans' photo becomes a premonition for the reality my camera captures in which the Steelstacks are defunct. The highly complicated form (the repetition of various engineered objects such as chimneys, cylinders, and tubes) appear in their dormancy to communicate a feeling of defeat. Without the fire of industry fueling their output, they now represent the depletion of a resource, the collapse of an unsustainable economic model, or more generally a failure of human design.