

he loses some of his "wagers."

"Ideally," Walser writes, "he would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style." His audiences were given not a polished "product," but something that was, in his case, more impressive: "a dramatic process of creation."

Retouching History

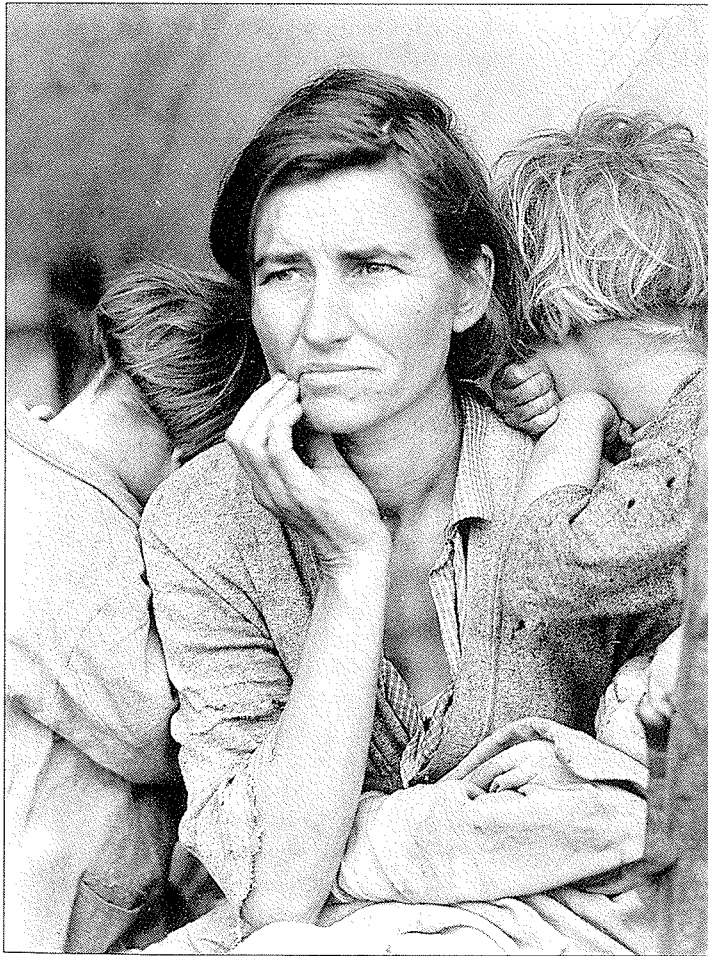
"The Farm Security Administration File: In and Out of Focus" by F. Jack Hurley, in *History of Photography* (Autumn 1993), Taylor & Francis Ltd., 4 John St., London WC1N 2ET, United Kingdom.

Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" and Arthur Rothstein's "Dust Storm" are among

the most powerful images of American life during the Great Depression. Those photos were among more than 272,000 taken by the small photographic section of the U.S. government's Resettlement Administration, established in 1935, and its successor, the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In recent decades, contends Hurley, a historian at Memphis State University, revisionist scholars have produced grossly distorted accounts of this New Deal enterprise, portraying the photographers as victims and the project itself as little more than a propaganda machine for the federal government or other sinister forces.

In his much-praised *American Photography: A Critical History, 1945 to the Present* (1984), for example, Jonathan Green quotes a 1940 letter from Roy Stryker, director of the photography

section, to photographer Jack Delano. With war approaching, Stryker was getting calls for photos that emphasized the positive aspects of American life. He asked Delano to get some pretty pictures of New England in autumn: "I know your damned photographer's soul writhes but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer's soul with Hitler at our doorstep? You are nothing but camera fodder to me." Green, according to Hurley, solemnly viewed this



Revisionists level unfounded charges against the New Deal's famous photographers, says Hurley. They accuse Dorothea Lange of having directed her "Migrant Mother" (left) to bring her hand to her face and claim that Arthur Rothstein staged "Dust Storm." They also portray Rothstein's "Bleached Skull of a Steer" as a complete fake.



"Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma," by Arthur Rothstein.

as a direct order to produce untruthful images for the government. He ignored, Hurley says, the context and the humor in Stryker's comment. Delano, moreover, was no oppressed pawn; he believed in the agency's mission of helping small farmers.

Sally Stein, in her introduction to *Marion Post Wolcott: F.S.A. Photographs* (1983), similarly distorts a 1940 telegram from photographer Marion Post Wolcott to Stryker, in order to portray her as having been victimized by him because of her gender. "You are a cruel and heartless master. I feel like a Finnish Boy Scout . . . am fingerless, toeless, earless. Wish you were here with the wind whistling through your britches too," she told Stryker, who had sent her to snap wintry scenes in New England. But she, too, was only kidding, as a long letter she sent to Stryker four days later makes abundantly clear—and indeed as Wolcott herself angrily made clear to Hurley after the Stein study appeared.

Two other recent works—Maren Stange's *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* and James Curtis's *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, both published in 1989—look at the FSA photographs through "neo-Marxian deconstructionist" lenses, Hurley says. Stange sees Stryker as a conspiratorial agent, "manipulating the poor photographers in the interests of capitalism." Curtis, without offering

any evidence whatsoever, accuses Lange of having intrusively directed the "Migrant Mother" in order to suppress the woman's individuality "so that she could become an archetypal representative of the values shared by Lange's middle-class audience."

The danger in all this slanted scholarship, Hurley says, is that the historical context in which the memorable FSA images were created will be lost. "If we allow that to happen we will have done damage to the images and to American history."



"Bleached Skull of a Steer, South Dakota Badlands," by Arthur Rothstein.

Arnold's Prescription

"Culture and Anarchy Today" by Steven Marcus, in *The Southern Review* (July 1993), 43 Allen Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La. 70803–5005.

Relativism rules American culture today. The "isms" of the moment—multiculturalism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism, among oth-