
ARTS & LETTERS

*Where Photography
Went Wrong*

"Whatever Happened to the Family of Man?" by Nicholas Lemann, in *The Washington Monthly* (Oct. 1984), 1711 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Fifty years ago, documentary photographs by the likes of Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White captured the national imagination and enriched *Life*, *Look*, and a rackful of lesser popular picture magazines. Today, writes Lemann, a *Washington Monthly* contributing editor, that kind of photography is moribund, and the nation is poorer for it.

Photojournalism became a powerful social and political influence in the United States during the Great Depression. The federal Farm Security Administration (FSA) commissioned photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Evans to capture on film the poverty of Oklahoma's drought-stricken Dust Bowl and other rural areas. They brought back striking images that "turned causes that might have seemed abstract into human flesh and blood," Lemann writes. The photos also helped to rally popular support for New Deal legislation. During World War II, pictures of Americans from all walks of life working together on the battle front, in factories, and in victory gar-

The "last hurrah" of traditional photojournalism was the famous 1955 Family of Man exhibition at Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art. Arthur Lavine's eloquent untitled picture of the hands of two workingmen was one of 503 by different photographers.



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dens lifted morale at home and overseas.

By the early 1960s, however, photojournalism was on the way out. Once-popular illustrated magazines began to lose readers to TV competition, and Washington had long since lost interest in FSA-like projects. Photographers themselves, meanwhile, began to regard their work as art and their business as self-expression. They began trying to "convey what was behind the lens, rather than what was in front of it," argues Lemann. A leader in the new "art" photography was Diane Arbus (1924–71), famed chronicler of midgets, transvestites, and other oddballs. Even Arbus's pictures of "normal" people convey her private conviction that "all of us are freaks."

Today, a photographer's place is supposed to be in the studio; a photographer's in a museum, art gallery, or up-scale fashion magazine. Only newspaper and newsmagazine photographers—long the "poor relations" of photojournalists—still carry cameras around their necks. "I can't think of an image that stays in my mind as a symbol of poverty [under] the Reagan administration," Lemann laments. He blames the demise of photojournalism. When the occasional powerful image does appear (e.g., in pictures of the 1984 Olympics), it only serves as a poignant reminder of what has been lost.

Defending Modern Literature

"Venerable Complications: Why Literature Is a Little Hard to Read" by Richard Poirier, in *Raritan* (Summer 1984), 165 College Ave., New Brunswick, N.J. 08901.

Modern literature is frequently denounced for its obscurity and impenetrability. That is to mistake virtues for vices, argues Poirier, editor of *Raritan*, for the opacity of literature is "essential to its value."

Serious literature has always been created for the few rather than the many. The spread of literacy during the 19th century created a broader potential audience, but also precipitated fears among writers that, as Henry James put it, the "monstrous masses" would undermine the "tradition of sensibility." In a kind of holding action against popularization, literature after the mid-19th century increasingly became "an extraordinarily demanding and self-conscious inquiry into its own resources and procedures," often requiring "translation" by a literary critic.

Today, literature is more exclusive than ever before. Poirier cautions against blaming TV or the arrival of a technological society in general for literature's isolation. In fact, he contends, technology is as much tormented by, as it is the tormentor of, literature. Writers and poets have always been nostalgic for a mythical unsullied past, and from the time that book two of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1589, they have made modern industry and its products the scapegoat for their sense of loss.

"Literature's distaste for Technology reveals, at last, a squeamishness about its own operations," Poirier contends. Literature, created out of language and shaped by religious, economic, and political influences, is no more "natural" than is technology. And yet literature *is* dif-