



Rhetorical Exposures: Confrontation and Contradiction in US Social Documentary Photography (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)

Christopher Carter

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Documentary photography aims to capture the material reality of life. In *Rhetorical Exposures*, Christopher Carter demonstrates how the creation and display of documentary photographs—often now called “imagetexts”—both invite analysis and raise persistent questions about the political and social causes for the bleak scenes of poverty and distress captured on film.

Carter’s carefully reasoned monograph examines both formal qualities of composition and the historical contexts of the production and display of documentary photographs. In *Rhetorical Exposures*, Carter explores Jacob Riis’s heartrending photos of Manhattan’s poor in late nineteenth-century New York, Walker Evans’s iconic images of tenant farmers in west Alabama, Ted Streshinsky’s images of 1960s social movements, Camilo José Vergara’s photographic landscapes of urban dereliction in the 1970s, and Chandra McCormick’s portraits of New Orleans’s Ninth Ward scarred by Hurricane Katrina.

While not ascribing specifically political or Marxist intentions to the photographers discussed, Carter frames his arguments in a class-based dialectic that addresses material want as an ineluctable result of social inequality. Carter argues that social documentary photography has the powerful capacity to disrupt complacent habits of viewing and to prompt viewers to confront injustice. Though photography may induce socially disruptive experiences, it remains vulnerable to the same power dynamics it subverts. Therefore, Carter offers a “rhetoric of exposure” that outlines how such social documentary images can be treated as highly tensioned rhetorical objects. His framework enables the analysis of photographs as heterogeneous records of the interaction of social classes and expressions of specific built environments. *Rhetorical Exposures* also discusses how photographs interact with oral and print media and relate to creations as diverse as public memorials, murals, and graphic novels.

As the creation and dissemination of new media continues to evolve in an environment of increasing anxiety about growing financial inequality, *Rhetorical Exposures* offers a very apt and timely discussion of the ways social documentary photography is created, employed, and understood.

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