Disappearing in plain sight: James Agee, Walker Evans and the urban commonplace

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1. James Agee, a writer, and Walker Evans, a photographer, are best known for their collaboration on the 1941 documentary book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In the summer of 1936, they spent a few weeks in Alabama on an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, observing three families of tenant farmers and describing their everyday routines and habits. Although the original draft submitted to *Fortune* was refused, it was eventually published as a standalone book four years later. In this joint work, Agee and Evans distance themselves from some of the criteria defining documentary books in the thirties: as William Stott notes, the primary aim of such books was to educate readers about social matters through a combination of facts and sentimentalism.[1] Documentary books often attempted to raise awareness on pressing social issues, such as the living and working conditions of the rural population during the Great Depression, through the use of text and photographs. However, Agee and Evans tend to envision these issues from a different standpoint: by focusing on the sharecroppers' daily lives and possessions, they renounce a conception of documentary based on newsworthy issues deeply rooted in a particular social context, in favour of documentary works centred on the commonplace and the ordinary. While *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is widely considered by scholars as the major point of contact between the works of Agee and those of Evans, the two artists continued to explore similar ideas in their individual endeavours after the publication of their collaborative documentary, notably in two projects they conducted around the same time, in 1939.

2. After their return from Alabama, Agee and Evans set to work on separate documentary projects revolving around the same subject: the city. Evans began taking a series of candid photographs in the New York City subway with a concealed camera. As for Agee, he was assigned to write another article for *Fortune*, this time about Brooklyn, to be published in a special issue on New York City. These two projects suffered a similar fate to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as their publication was significantly delayed: Agee's Brooklyn manuscript was once again refused by *Fortune* on the grounds of creative differences, and remained unpublished until 1968, when it

1 W. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 18.

resurfaced in *Esquire* after Agee's death, under the title "Brooklyn Is".[2] The manuscript was later turned into a book by the University of Fordham Press in 2005. Similarly, Evans struggled to find a publisher for his subway photographs: a selection of eight portraits was included in the *Cambridge Review* in 1956,[3] and another six photographs were inserted in a 1962 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*,[4] but most of the pictures were not released until the publication of *Many Are Called*, a photobook with a preface written by Agee, in 1966. While both of these individual works have received critical attention of their own, they have seldom been the subject of a compared analysis, despite some striking similarities in their way of approaching their shared object.

3. In the streets of New York City, Evans's camera and Agee's prose highlight very specific aspects of urban life, namely anonymous subway passengers and the everyday routines of Brooklyn's inhabitants. Their choice to emphasise things and people pertaining to the realm of the commonplace does not merely suggest a singular outlook on the city, brought forward by a series of formal experiments within the parameters of their respective media. Indeed, the meticulous attention that is paid to the commonplace in both works is also a political stance, in Rancière's sense of the word, in so far as it seeks to disturb "the hierarchical model […] that divides humanity into the elite of active beings and the multitude of passive beings".[5] By orienting the reader or viewer's gaze towards things, people and moments that are usually disregarded, Agee and Evans explore the geographical and metaphorical meaning of the commonplace, which can refer to both a space where people are brought together (such as the city), and to things that are ordinary and unremarkable. While, in the context of the thirties, documentary is a genre that usually concerns itself with social progress and reform, the work of these two artists endeavours to bring more visibility to ordinary things, and to point out the intrinsic value that the writer and the photographer perceive in them. As Didi-Huberman suggests, it is up to the artists' (and, by extension, the viewer's) gaze to prevent banality and cliché from obscuring our vision of the "figures of the common", that is to say of places and spaces where people are brought together, in order to settle down or merely to transit through.[6] Beyond ensuring that the commonplace rightfully belongs in documentary works, Agee and Evans redefine the genre's borders by turning it away from its usual discursive strategy, which hinges on a carefully-crafted combination of text and photographs designed to provoke a strong

2 J. Agee, "Brooklyn Is", *Esquire,* December 1968, 52-74, 180-181. Further quotations in the text will refer to the 2005 edition.
3 W. Evans, "Rapid Transit: Eight photographs", *The Cambridge Review*, Winter 1955, 16-24.
4 W. Evans, "Walker Evans: The Unposed Portrait", *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1963, 120-125.
5 J. Rancière, *Le Fil perdu*, 12.
6 "Or, c'est à notre regard […] qu'il revient de ne pas laisser les lieux communs affaiblir ou même détruire les figures du commun." G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants,* 97.

emotion in the reader.

4. We shall first focus on Agee's and Evans's respective formal experimentation with urban spaces, underlining that the city appears as the ideal place to engage in transgressive experiences. Indeed, the urban environment allows the artists to blend into the crowd and adopt the stance of a casual observer. By erasing or concealing their presence, Agee and Evans are able to highlight the existence of objects, places and ordinary lives that run the risk of fading into oblivion due to a lack of proper recognition. As we shall then see, the artists' formal experiments also have deeply political implications: the choice to eschew the newsworthy in favour of an acknowledgement of everyday scenes and anonymous people shifts the documentary's performative dimension away from the political activism of thirties documentary books and orients it towards a new conception of this genre, focused on defending the value and singularity that are to be found in the ordinary.

The city as the *locus* of formal experimentation: a poetics of self-erasure

5. *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is* are two individual documentary projects that explore different aspects of New York City in the late thirties. The choice of an exclusively urban environment signals a departure from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s record of tenant farmer lives in rural Alabama, and this change of scenery and subject enables Agee and Evans to experiment with different formal and aesthetic choices. Agee's stance, for example, is radically different in *Brooklyn Is*: contrary to the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in which he systematically inserts himself as a character among those he describes, his posture in Brooklyn is that of an observer, who keeps himself at a distance, whether he is watching the inhabitants or partaking in a dinner party at a wealthy couple's home in Brooklyn Heights. The very first words of the text set the tone for Agee's stance and immediately cast him as an observer of the city's ordinary motions: "*Watching them* in the trolleys, or along the exhaustible reduplications of the streets of their small tradings and their sleep [...]" (3, my emphasis). Agee's visit to the Prospect Park Zoo, in the last pages of the book, provides a metaphorical counterpoint to this, as he remarks that "they [the animals] are *no longer being watched*", much like the inhabitants of Brooklyn (45, my emphasis). In between these two moments, Agee visits part of Brooklyn by car, accompanied by a young local journalist: the car allows him to observe the urban landscape while being isolated from the outside, especially as it appears to be an unusual choice of locomotion for an artist seeking to

describe a city as "the borough of being". Indeed, cities are more commonly explored by writers on foot, and their meanderings in the streets allow them to familiarise themselves with the places surrounding them and to recompose them into an entirely singular space.[7] Agee temporarily shuns this *topos* of city writing in order to provide a different point of view, in which he finds himself being driven by the journalist, whose starkly different perception of Brooklyn and political opinions (Agee notes that the man is a nazi sympathiser, 22) are layered and contrasted with his own. In the case of Evans, the city is a more familiar object since, in 1929, the artist made a series of photographs of Brooklyn Bridge that were later used as illustrations for his friend Hart Crane's famous poem. From the beginning of his subway project however, Evans sought to erase himself from the picture-taking process as much as possible. He was already known for his neutral and stark attitude to portraiture, abstaining from the kind of formal choices that were popular among documentary photographers in the thirties when portraying anonymous people, such as the use of various angles (high-angle or low-angle shots). In the subway photographs, Evans goes one step further in his approach to self-erasure, using a camera concealed in his overcoat and linked to a remote shutter mechanism, which he activated by pressing a button. Judith Keller suggests that this setup might have been influenced by the works of Paul Strand, who pioneered the use of a candid camera in street photography,[8] though it is also likely that Evans was inspired by the standardised pictures taken in automated photo-booths or with Penny Picture portrait cameras.[9] By choosing a concealed setup, Evans voluntarily relinquishes part of his control in the composition of the picture, since he is unable to look through the viewfinder to properly focus and frame his shots.

6. The writer and the photographer adopt similar postures by choosing to step back from the things they observe, blending into the crowd while paradoxically maintaining a certain distance. This allows them to freely experiment within the parameters of their own medium: while in Alabama, they lived among the tenant farmers and did not conceal the fact that they worked for a magazine; the urban environment (and particularly places of transit such as the subway or the street), where one can easily go unnoticed, offers an ideal setting for unconventional aesthetic practices.[10] While *Brooklyn Is* and *Many Are Called* are resolutely individual projects, the two

7 This is what Certeau refers to as "pedestrian enunciation" ("énonciation piétonnière" in the original text). See M. de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, 148.

8 J. Keller, "Walker Evans and *Many Are Called*: Shooting Blind", 165.

9 As evidenced by Evans's early experiments with self-portraiture in photobooths, or his choice to include a picture of a display of such Penny portraits in *American Photographs*, an earlier photobook. See Evans, "Penny Picture Display, Savannah, 1936", *American Photographs*, 2. See also [Penny Picture Display, Savannah, 1936] 1987.1100.482, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265556 (Accessed October 5, 2020).

10 In his study of discretion, Pierre Zaoui highlights the importance of cities and crowds as places where one can freely disappear ("se faire discret"), thus operating an "ontological shift": "[...] glisser subrepticement des êtres et des

artists tend to look to other media for inspiration: Evans channels his affinity for literary techniques into his concealed-camera setup and Agee's prose is heavily influenced by his fascination for the visual arts, most notably photography. In light of his previous work, which gives great importance to composition, and in particular to framing, Evans's choice to erase himself from the picture-taking process seems unusual. It might be interpreted as an attempt to emulate the impersonal style the photographer admired in Flaubert's works, as he confessed to Leslie Katz in a 1971 interview.[11] Evans's reference to Flaubert, a writer, highlights the fact that his photographic endeavours go beyond the scope of his own medium, by adapting a "method" derived from literature, such as the narratological notion of point of view, to photography, thus establishing a common frame of reference[12] between the two media. Indeed, Evans's automatic picture-taking process allows him to avoid some of the pitfalls of posed portraiture, namely the confrontation between the subject's gaze and the camera lens, since in most of the subway photographs, the subjects are looking outside the frame and seem unaware that they are being photographed. However, the "non-appearance of author" Evans claims to admire in Flaubert's works is precisely a non-*appearance*: a closer look at the sequencing of pictures in *Many Are Called* reveals that in some photographs, the subjects give the impression of looking directly at the camera, even though they are all completely oblivious to its presence. According to Jeff Rosenheim's afterword, Evans took more than six hundred photographs for this project,[13] and out of the 89 plates selected for the book, at least a dozen feature subjects who seem to be gazing straight at the photographer's lens. Plate number 66 is undoubtedly the most striking example, especially considering that another picture of the same man, looking outside the frame this time, is included as plate 75.[14] On a few occasions, Evans had more than one picture of a single person (or group of people), referred to in the Getty Museum's archive as "variants".[15] In most cases, Evans simply cropped the pictures before including them in the book. Although we shall not look too closely upon the precise sequencing of the photographs, nor even suggest there might be any narrative meaning behind it, it seems relevant to point out that Evans chose to insert

choses vers les relations qu'ils produisent". See P. Zaoui, *La Discrétion ou l'art de disparaître*, 14.

11 Evans specifically mentions being inspired by Flaubert's "objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of author, the non-subjectivity". See A. Bertrand, *Walker Evans, le secret de la photographie: entretien avec Leslie Katz,* 14.

12 Ortel borrows the notion of "common frame of reference" from Paul Watzlawick's theories on communication and applies it to the interaction between photography and writing. See P. Ortel, *La Littérature à l'ère de la photographie,* 178-179.

13 J. Rosenheim, "Afterword", in Evans, *Many Are Called,* 197.

14 The plates and their "variants" are available on the Getty Museum's online archive. For plate 66, see [Subway Portrait] 84.XM.956.627, http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/45960/walker-evans-subway-portrait-american-1941-print-about-1965/ (Accessed February 13, 2020). For plate 75, see [Subway Portrait] 84.XM.956.636, http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/45969/walker-evans-subway-portrait-american-1941-print-about-1965/ (Accessed February 13, 2020).

15 J. Keller, "The Making of *Many Are Called*", 190.

these portraits of subjects looking straight at the camera among those in which the subjects look completely unaware of being photographed, as if to replicate the ordinary experience one might have in the subway when accidentally crossing another person's gaze. Evans's presence in the subway photographs is almost transparent, as some of the subjects look straight at him, but do not see him for what he truly is: a photographer using a concealed camera and disguised as an ordinary subway passenger. As much as Evans might have attempted to erase himself from the composition of these photographs, these scattered portraits may also be seen as occasional, accidental reminders of his presence.

7. While Evans was inspired by literary methods, Agee's prose is also deeply influenced by the visual arts, and particularly by photography: his choice of contrasting vantage points to describe Brooklyn can be assimilated to the use of different photographic angles, and the succession of short everyday scenes he witnesses in the streets of Brooklyn are embedded in the text like a series of photographs. Agee too uses techniques specific to his own medium in order to give it a broader resonance: his peculiar use of punctuation (colons and semi-colons) and conjunctions (especially "or", "and") allow him to juxtapose a series of short moments resembling snapshots within one long sentence, producing a striking textual and visual effect, which could be assimilated to the "visual division" ("découpage visuel") of prose alluded to by Philippe Ortel.[16] An early passage describing such everyday scenes in various neighbourhoods of Brooklyn provides a good example of this process:

> In Prospect Park on Sunday they are all there, on the lake, among the bending walks, sown on the seas of lawn; the old, the weary, the loving, and the young; who move in flotations of seeds upon placid winds: a family, gathering its blankets and its baskets, quarrelling a little: four young men hatless in dark coats walk rapidly across the grass in an air of purpose and of enigma: a little boy running alone who suddenly leaps into the air: another little boy and an elderly man and a rolled umbrella, hand in hand: […] (12-13)

In this excerpt, the punctuation allows Agee to string together various short scenes of ordinary life in a single sentence, in the manner of snapshots or cinematographic tracking shots. Much like a series of photographs, the sequencing is carefully thought out: the mysterious (and perhaps slightly ominous) young men in dark coats are inserted between profoundly domestic scenes such as a family picnic or a little boy playing in the park. Beyond the visual effect brought on by Agee's singular use of colons and semi-colons, the constant shift in point of view might also be likened to

16 P. Ortel, *La Littérature à l'ère de la photographie,* 214.

techniques borrowed from the visual arts. Agee begins by describing the view from Brooklyn Bridge, establishing a double vantage point between Manhattan's skyscrapers ("the whole of living is drawn up straining into verticals", 4) and Brooklyn's horizontally-lined houses ("living is nevertheless relaxed upon horizontalities", 4). From a purely visual standpoint, the effort in structuring the two spaces through horizontal and vertical lines can be assimilated to the act of framing and composing a photograph. In addition to this, Agee also describes the cityscape from various angles, and begins his overview of Brooklyn by detailing and listing its various neighbourhoods, giving the impression of a bird's eye view ("All the neighborhoods that make up this city; those well known, and those which are indicated on no official map", 9). Once he has listed the different neighbourhoods, he moves on to a view of the streets ("the sea of living", 12) from the Fulton Street elevated railway line, before returning to street-level as he walks "deep in Flatbush" (25). These variations produce effects similar to those brought on by distinct photographic angles (most notably high-angle and low-angle shots): Agee's prose is meticulously visual, constantly exploring its subject from contrasting perspectives in order to fully render its complexity.

8. The formal experimentations outlined above suggest that both Agee's and Evans's conceptions of documentary extend beyond the scope of their respective media. While *Brooklyn Is* does not include any photographs, and *Many Are Called* does not feature any substantial text accompanying the images besides Agee's preface, both artists look outside the parameters of their own craft for inspiration. While the coexistence of photography and the written text is a major trait of documentary books in the thirties, Agee and Evans subvert it by neatly separating the two media, channelling their mutual influence into the documentary's very form. This is particularly true of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, although it can be said of *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is* as well: despite being individual projects, the two books offer distinct outlooks on a shared object. The aim is not only to adapt the documentary form to the object it seeks to describe, but also to transgress its usual standards by opening the genre in order to include records of common spaces and ordinary people rather than landmarks or socially-charged issues. In his survey of documentary photography in the twenties and thirties, Olivier Lugon notes that most documentary efforts were focused on preventing the present from disappearing without leaving a trace: the photographic image was meant to serve as the record itself,[17] even in the case of Evans who dedicated himself to photographing things usually deemed insignificant. However, as Agee and Evans's experiments in

17 O. Lugon, *Le Style documentaire*, 373-374.

Many Are Called and *Brooklyn Is* show, documentary is not merely a matter of recording and preserving the present: when focused on commonplace settings and ordinary people, it also seeks to ensure these things are made visible, and not ignored.

Disappearing in the city: "ordinary visibility" and invisibility

9. By hiding in plain sight among the inhabitants of Brooklyn or the crowds of New York City's subway passengers, Agee and Evans are free to observe without being seen. The setting also allows them to devise different techniques in order to highlight the most commonplace aspects of the city, which are generally disregarded or deemed insignificant. Bruce Bégout likens the everyday to the figure in the carpet in Henry James' eponymous short story: because of its ubiquity and of the sense of familiarity that is felt towards it, it is often taken for granted, and no particular attention is paid to its existence. Obscured by its own "ordinary visibility", the everyday paradoxically ends up becoming more difficult to accurately perceive.[18] Bégout's analysis of the everyday appears particularly relevant when transposed to an urban setting: the succession of daily moments compiled by Agee can be read as an effort to bring more attention to things which are not normally mentioned in descriptions of Brooklyn. Similarly, Evans does not merely capture strangers at their most vulnerable, but also at their most invisible as they are transiting from one place to another, in the subway where one generally keeps to oneself. Agee emphasises this aspect in the book's preface, writing: "Those who use the New York subways are several millions. The facts about them are so commonplace that they have become almost as meaningless, as impossible to realise, as death in war" (15). The ubiquity of anonymous people in shared urban spaces such as the street or the subway makes them considerably harder to grasp in a meaningful way, effectively threatening to render them invisible: as Michel de Certeau points out, the city is one of the "thresholds where visibility ceases".[19] Agee's remarks from the preface of *Many Are Called* quoted above suggest that the subway passengers' anonymity could be something that confines them to a form of invisibility exacerbated by the subway's status as an ordinary place of transit. The ability to disappear in plain sight is profoundly ambivalent, and this ambiguity is fully exploited by Agee and Evans, who assume part of the burden of invisibility by positioning themselves as discreet observers. Their

18 "C'est sa visibilité ordinaire qui le rend invisible, en nous laissant croire que tout y est déjà manifeste." B. Bégout, *La Découverte du quotidien*, 21.

19 "[…] des seuils où cesse la visibilité", M. de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, 141. The expression is used by Certeau to describe the streets of Manhattan.

projects do not aim to "elevate" the ordinary, but on the contrary to show that commonplace elements have an intrinsic value. To this end, both artists attempt to orient or shift the viewer's gaze towards people and things that are normally overlooked.

10. In *Brooklyn Is* and *Many Are Called*, Agee and Evans resort to various techniques and strategies to highlight the inherent value they perceive in the faces of anonymous subway passengers or Brooklyn inhabitants. Since Evans used a concealed camera, he could not properly frame his shots, and therefore made liberal use of cropping in post-procession in order to point at certain details. Reframing and cutting certain things or people out of the picture allows Evans to guide the viewer's gaze towards what he deems more important, namely his subjects' expression. Cropping can be seen as a way of calling attention to select details, whether it is a striking expression or a piece of clothing, a newspaper, a singular posture. Most of the plates in *Many Are Called* are cropped to varying degrees: sometimes Evans merely used cropping to correct the effects of his concealed setup, reframing his shots and re-centring the subjects, but in a few instances, the cropping appears more significant. Plate number 18 provides a good example of this, as Evans chose to entirely crop the woman standing on the left of the picture, in order to focus the shot on the man on the right.[20] There seems to be no inherent logic to be deciphered in the way that Evans decided to crop, select or arrange the pictures, other than the fact that their variety should reflect a diverse range of people and expressions. In his short analysis of *Many Are Called,* Jean-Christophe Bailly suggests that the broad range of faces and the frontal framing serve to recreate the "ordinary experience" of finding oneself facing strangers on the subway.[21] We might also add that this ordinary experience is slightly altered, since the book form allows the reader to freely look at the passengers without being seen in return: because of this, Evans's intricate setup provides an entirely singular experience of an extremely commonplace situation, without attempting to "elevate" it by adjusting composition parameters such as contrast or picture angle. By focusing the pictures on certain details or faces through cropping, Evans directs the viewer's attention on the complex mechanisms that underlie such an apparently commonplace situation as taking the subway, preventing it from slipping into banality, which Bégout defines as a debased form of the everyday.[22]

20 For plate 18, see [Subway Portrait] 84.XM.956.579, http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/45913/walker-evans-subway-portrait-american-1938-1941-print-about-1955-1965/ (Accessed February 14, 2020), and for the uncropped variant, [Subway Portrait] 84.XM.956.651, http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/45984/walker-evans-subway-portrait-american-1938-1941/ (Accessed February 14, 2020).

21 J.-C. Bailly, *L'Imagement*, 56.

22 "La banalité représente une quotidienneté figée, dégradée, dénaturée sur laquelle tout le monde fait fond avec la joie résignée de la conscience malheureuse." B. Bégout, *La Découverte du quotidien*, 30.

11. Agee, on the other hand, draws attention to a peculiar kind of beauty to be found in the everyday by focusing on horizontality. One of the aims of his depiction of Brooklyn is to distinguish this borough from Manhattan, hence the essay's title, "Brooklyn Is", which purports to list the ways in which Brooklyn exists as an irreducibly singular place. In order to achieve this distinction, Agee characterises Brooklyn as a city built on horizontal lines, both literally and metaphorically: his assertion that "this whole of living is nevertheless relaxed upon horizontalities" (4) is very much a reference to Brooklyn's architecture, and more specifically to the rows of houses that are in sharp contrast to Manhattan's skyscrapers, quoted by Agee as symbols of verticality. The reference to "horizontalities" also alludes to the distinct pace of life in the streets of the borough, which the writer describes in long sentences that also stretch horizontally on the page, as if to embody the things they depict. The written picture that Agee provides of Brooklyn is that of a sum of ordinary moments, strung together through his use of conjunctions. This is notable in the first pages of the text, when Agee describes the different neighbourhoods of Brooklyn:

> Or Eastern Parkway, the Central Park West of Brooklyn; in its first stretches near Prospect Park, the dwelling of the most potent Jews of the City; a slow then more swift ironing out, and the end again in Brownsville:
>
> Or Bay Ridge, and its genteel gentile apartment buildings, and the said homes of Scandinavian seafarers:
>
> Or Greenpoint and Williamsburg and Bushwick, the wood tenements, bare lots and broken vistas, the balanced weights and images of production and poverty; […] (11-12)

Here, the use of "or" allows Agee to list the various neighbourhoods without any distinct order and to provide a short summary of their characteristics without having to start a new sentence for each of them: every description beginning with "or" is connected to the main clause "All the neighborhoods that make up this city; [...]", 9). Analysing Agee's prose in *Brooklyn Is*, Marielle Macé notes that the use of conjunctions serves to mirror the horizontality that the writer perceives in the city, and to emulate it in a writing style that relies heavily on the absence of any hierarchy between the elements described.[23] Indeed, all the neighbourhoods are listed in a similar way, and the horizontal dimension of Agee's writing extends beyond his inventory of Brooklyn's areas: elements are often given the same degree of attention within the sentence regardless of their nature. This sense of a prose seeking to establish an utmost equality between all the elements that it describes is

23 "[...] cette prose est à la mesure […] du désir démocratique d'un côtoiement sans hiérarchies, de distinguos sans distinctions […]", M. Macé, *Styles*, 245.

also brought about by Agee's use of punctuation, particularly colons and semi-colons as can be seen in the passage quoted above, which is in keeping with the writer's earlier experiments in the text of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The description that concludes Agee's overview of the different neighbourhoods provides a good example:

> […] or the mother who walks down on Division Avenue whose infant hexes her from his carriage in a gargoyle frown of most intense suspicion: or the street-writing on Park Slope: "Lois I have gone up the street. Don't forget to bring your skates": or the soft whistling of the sea off Coney Island: or the façade of the Academy of Music, a faded print of Boston's Symphony Hall: or the young pair who face each other astride a bicycle in Canarsie: […] (12-13)

In this extract, the interweaving of punctuation (colons) and conjunctions (mostly "or") allows Agee to juxtapose incongruous elements: scenes of everyday life (the mother and her child, the young couple on a bike) produce a humorous and light-hearted contrast with the evocation of one of Brooklyn's landmarks (the Academy of Music), which is in turn contrasted with Coney Island, a popular seaside location, and with some rather more ephemeral landmarks in the form of street graffiti. While the punctuation serves to thread these elements into a single sentence, the choice of "or" seems to go beyond a mere desire for a democratic and egalitarian form of writing. Indeed, "or" indicates not only the possibility of choice, but also its refusal: Agee lists all those elements together and presents them as alternative views of Brooklyn, and in doing so also affirms his refusal to choose between any of those views, thus arguing that any and all of those elements are necessary (and contribute equally to) a well-balanced portrait of Brooklyn.

12. The focus on horizontality and the use of cropping are two different ways of orienting the viewer's gaze towards what the artists consider worthy of visibility. In cropping his pictures during post-procession, Evans centres the viewer's gaze on his subjects' expressions, whereas Agee, through his use of punctuation and emphasis on horizontality, also directs the reader's gaze towards precise objects or elements (most particularly things such as graffiti or scenes of everyday life). These techniques show that despite their shared subject, each artist uses distinct methods in an attempt to restore the visibility of ordinary things and people. Although the writer and the photographer make a point of describing the city through its most commonplace elements, the means used to accentuate them are starkly opposed: the photographer selects only a few pictures and carries out a further degree of selection by cropping them, whereas the writer seeks to provide as much detail as possible, granting every single element the same amount of importance and refusing to classify the things he enumerates. Agee's and Evans's works, whether individual or

collaborative, tend to stray away from the documentary genre's archival ambitions, as outlined by Lugon: while there is a definite intention to record and to preserve certain elements within the present, the nature of the things that are recorded appears as significant as the recording process itself. Even though Agee refuses any form of hierarchy in his depictions of Brooklyn, he does consciously choose to emphasise certain aspects of the borough rather than others. This very decision, much like Evans's preference for photographing anonymous and ordinary people, considerably shifts the scope of the documentary genre: if the aim of documentary is, as Lugon suggests,[24] to preserve a record of things that might be historically relevant in the future, then documentary works revolving around the commonplace imply that ordinary things, places and people are worthy of being not only recorded, but made visible, and defended against disregard.

Documenting the commonplace: from political activism to a politics of visibility

13. Agee and Evans's decision to focus their documentary projects on the commonplace rather than on the newsworthy or on current social issues is not simply an aesthetic choice. In the thirties, the documentary genre was strongly associated with political activism: the dozen books published during the Great Depression do not merely purport to present an objective and balanced view of the situation, but also to influence the reader's opinions through a combination of text and photographs.[25] Stott likens these "social documentaries" to a form of propaganda, albeit one geared towards social progress and improvement, and remarks that it was particularly popular among some artists and intellectuals.[26] The two works analysed in this paper also provide straightforward political remarks, such as Agee's scathing portrayal of upper-middle class Brooklynites, or the very title chosen by Evans for his photobook: "Many are called", implying also, if one follows the biblical quote, that "few are chosen". One might argue, however, that Agee's and Evans's effort to pull the documentary genre away from its original role of analysing socially-charged problems in favour of exploring ordinary settings and people might lessen its performative ability – in other words, its capacity to convince and move its readers by presenting a carefully-constructed and argued view of a current situation. Although *Brooklyn Is* and *Many Are Called* are distinct from the

24 O. Lugon, *Le Style documentaire*, 368.

25 W.J.T. Mitchell notes that documentary books and photo-essays are "the product of progressive, liberal consciences, associated with political reform and leftist causes". W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 287.

26 "Usually [social documentary]'s purpose is not so altruistic and indefinite; it has an axe to grind." W. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 21.

politically-charged activism of documentary in the thirties, the attention given to the commonplace in both works also entails a clear political stance.

14. In *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*, Georges Didi-Huberman questions the means available for artists to represent a community of people, playing on the various meanings of the French word "peuple", which can refer to the population of a country or region, to a crowd of people, or to "common", ordinary people depending on context.[27] His main argument is that the advent of modes of representation such as photography, that are more readily available and widely circulated, have left "people" more exposed than ever. Nevertheless, overexposure threatens to make them even more invisible in the long run, for exposure does not necessarily entail recognition or acknowledgement, nor does it allow the subjects the possibility to tell their stories in their own words.[28] Over the course of his study, Didi-Huberman analyses the works of Philippe Bazin, a French documentary photographer who captured the faces of anonymous people in institutional settings, such as hospitals and prisons. He thus argues that although Bazin's photographs do not restore the subjects' voice and ability to tell their own stories, they still offer these anonymous people the opportunity to confront an external gaze.[29] The original expression, "faire face", also refers to the possibility of acknowledgment or mutual recognition, through the concept of the face ("visage", which is also mentioned in the text). Even though Evans's photographic experiments predate those of Bazin by a few decades,[30] Didi-Huberman's comments on Bazin can be related to Evans's documentary approach in many ways: the succession of subway pictures never restores the name of the anonymous subjects photographed, nor even attempts to tell their story, but manages, by underlining their anonymity and the commonness of the setting, to give them a certain kind of visibility that, coupled with the absence of any caption or text, appears closer to consideration and recognition than to overexposure. Evans's portraits allow the subway passengers to "face" the gaze of the viewer while retaining their full anonymity. Though there is value to be found in individual portraits (especially through Evans's emphasis on facial expressions), *Many Are Called* stresses the challenges inherent to the representation of what Didi-Huberman refers to as a "community of faces",[31] which cannot be reduced to a mere sum of juxtaposed faces.

27 G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*, 20.

28 "Mais la surexposition ne vaut guère mieux: trop de lumière aveugle. Les peuples exposés au ressassement stéréotypé des images sont, eux aussi, des peuples exposés à disparaitre." G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés,* 15.

29 "[...] redresser les visages, les soutenir, les rendre à leur *pouvoir de faire face* […]", G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés*, 15, italics in the text.

30 The photographs analysed in Didi-Huberman's text were taken in a hospital ward in the late eighties.

31 "communauté des visages", G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*, 51.

15. Evans's conception of the documentary portrait hinges on complete anonymity: a portrait is meant to represent a person, and usually provides some form of identification alongside the picture, in its title or caption. Evans refutes this entirely by making anonymity a constitutive element (both thematic and aesthetic) in his idea of portraiture. The absence of a clearly stated identity, which might expose the photographed subject to disappearance, is not seen as something to be restored or corrected through a caption or any kind of text: for Evans, the value of his photographs stems from the anonymous and ordinary nature of the subjects, as he explained in a 1971 interview with Paul Cummings.[32] Even though Evans remained firmly against any kind of partisan appropriation of his work during his entire career, his documentary efforts, and particularly the subway photographs, seem to have deep political resonance. Indeed, the notion of politics is not limited to partisan considerations or political activism: Jacques Rancière defines it as a series of practices that seek to disturb the distribution of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise.[33] According to Rancière's definition, any work of art that attempts to shift existing hierarchies between what is commonly seen and what is commonly invisible, for instance, is political in nature, although not necessarily partisan or militant. Through their choice to base their documentary works on ordinary beings moving through a commonplace setting, Agee and Evans manage to differentiate their works from the more rigid format of thirties documentary, which is deeply rooted in photojournalism and whose ultimate aim is social reform. *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is* are both striking examples of works driven by dissensus, as defined in Rancière's *Le Spectateur émancipé*:

> Il y a ensuite […] les stratégies des artistes qui se proposent de changer les repères de ce qui est visible et énonçable, de faire voir ce qui n'était pas vu, de faire voir autrement ce qui était trop aisément vu, de mettre en rapport ce qui ne l'était pas, dans le but de produire des ruptures dans le tissu sensible des perceptions et dans la dynamique des affects.[34]

Rancière's definition of political art underlines two distinct but simultaneous approaches to the commonplace: artists such as Agee and Evans not only attempt to steer the gaze towards things that are generally ignored or rendered invisible ("faire voir ce qui n'était pas vu"), but also to ensure that readers and viewers will cast a more considerate look at things that are deprived of attention because of their "ordinary visibility". This "strategy" is also at work in the pictures and text of *Let*

32 "That's my idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind, not of a celebrity, not journalism." P. Cummings, "Oral History Interview with Walker Evans", Oct. 13-Dec. 23 1971. The full transcript is available from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art website: https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-walker-evans-11721#transcript (Accessed February 17, 2020).

33 "[...] une distribution du visible et de l'invisible, de la parole et du bruit", J. Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé*, 66.

34 J. Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé,* 72.

Us Now Praise Famous Men, which focus exclusively on the everyday life of the sharecroppers, a subject frequently ignored or glossed over by documentary books and journalistic reportage in favour of their struggles with physically demanding work and abject poverty. However, this intent seems even more fully carried out in works such as *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is*, since the city (as a public place and contrary to the sharecroppers' homes) provides an environment in which subjects are constantly seen but rarely looked at. This is particularly true of the subway, but also of the street. Agee consciously eschews Brooklyn's landmarks in favour of elements that are in plain view but never the subject of any particular attention, devoting an entire paragraph of his essay to graffiti and obscene drawings he sees on the walls of various boroughs, and going so far as to transcribe them onto the page, thus threading them into the fabric of his text as they are threaded into the fabric of the city (24).

16. Much like Evans's photographs, Agee's text disrupts established hierarchies between what is worthy of being seen and what is commonly ignored. *Brooklyn Is* relies on contrast between its loosely structured parts: the range of everyday moments described is interrupted twice to make way for socially-charged anecdotes which allude to the political context of the late thirties. Agee's acerbic account of a dinner party at the house of a wealthy couple in Brooklyn Heights (given the subheading of "Social Note" in the text), provides the most striking example: in an abrupt change of tone, the writer angrily mocks his hosts' remarks on the increasingly multicultural population of their neighbourhood ("'*I do wish they'd clear them away*'", 37, italics in the text). Like the drive with the young Brooklyn journalist, this "Social Note" interrupts the description of Brooklyn and its peculiar rhythm, as if to emphasise the timeless aspect of the everyday scenes listed by Agee. The contrast can be felt in the choice of tenses, as both the drive and the "Social Note" are mostly narrated in the past tense, while the writer's Sunday stroll in Prospect Park, for instance, is fully narrated in the present and detached from any reference to the turbulent pre-war political climate ("In Prospect Park on Sunday they are all there, on the lake, along the bending walks, sown on the seas of lawn […]", 41). Although the effects of current events on the city's life are alluded to, the majority of Agee's description of Brooklyn hinges on aspects that are simultaneously timeless and ephemeral, much like the graffiti mentioned in the text. Indeed, the succession of anonymous people and their daily routines seem unmarred by time or political events, but their fleeting quality is also highlighted by Agee's immediate quoting of the illustrious names listed on the façade of the Institute of Arts, whose claim to eternal fame only seems to remind the reader of the anonymity of "the old, the weary, the loving, and the young" described in the text (41). Agee's preface to *Many*

Are Called similarly emphasises the timeless, universal quality of Evans's subway portraits: indeed, the writer notes that "[the subway passengers] are members of every race and nation of the earth. They are of all ages, of all classes, of almost every imaginable occupation" (16). The focus on commonplace people or situations in *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is* does not seem designed to build a mere catalogue from amassed ordinary moments for purely archival purposes. Rather, the artists' choice to insist on more unsightly or marginal aspects of the city appears to be an attempt to point out the irreducible singularity of these commonplace elements. As Marielle Macé remarks, analysing or depicting singular elements also implies a form of responsibility and commitment from the artists, who invest these things, places and people with a sense of value and defend them against invisibility and contempt.[35] The preface of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* asserts that Agee and Evans's documentary approach involves not only the recording but also the "communication, analysis and defense"[36] of such elements. The work of the two artists in their subsequent individual projects, such as *Many Are Called* and *Brooklyn Is*, reflects the shift from the partisan activism of thirties documentary books towards a new conception of documentary that revolves around the recording and defence of ordinary places, objects, and lives. This seems to be a common thread in the works of both Agee and Evans: although their methods may sometimes be at odds (Agee being pointedly more radical and Evans rejecting any partisan interpretation of his work), these artists share a common point in their willingness to redefine documentary as a genre that concerns itself with what deserves to be visible.

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