

C&N: Assignment 4, Rework

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Tutor Feedback

... Rather than using your word count to include an opening description of the image of Alex Salmond however (which I think moves into slightly different territory) I would be more inclined to use an example of a more recent photographer who also explored working class culture in documentary practice/portraiture in a less constructed way – perhaps Jim Mortram’s portraiture in *Small Town Inertia* (<https://www.bjp-online.com/tag/jim-mortram/>) or even Daniel Meadow’s The Bus - a long-form community portrait project <https://www.photobus.co.uk/>.

... Both Meadows and Mortram – unlike Brandt – developed long-standing relationships with their subjects which of course is very different with Brandt’s relationship to his. (Your citation of Lange’s Migrant Mother is very apt here. Again, I’d be tempted to write a little more on the subsequent re-reading of Migrant Mother rather than including the image of the falling man (which I think really needs an essay all to itself, so shocking is it’s effect).

[spellchecked ✓]

My Reply

Thanks for your feedback. I was trying to use the Salmond pic and Falling Man as extreme examples to work my way through (my view of) the analytical techniques, but I see that I would have been better off choosing counter examples that make better contrasts with Brandt’s approach. I’ll rework it along the lines you suggest, but I might use other contrast examples.

The plan

1. Take out Salmond and Falling Man, park any quotes for recycling.
2. Brandt’s miner first, then Tish Murtha and Mortram - integrity and involvement.
3. keep the three at the end but expand Lange, including the project manager whose name escapes me
4. Bugger the word count



Fig. 1 Bill Brandt, *Northumbrian coal miner eating his evening meal*, 1937
© the estate of Bill Brandt

The assignment brief opens with the phrase '*A picture is worth a thousand words*' and (without any further reference to it) asks for an essay on a single picture, deploying 'rigorous and critical analysis' (Boothroyd, 2017, p.92).

There are numerous published approaches to analysing photographs. Combining Barrett (2000), Shore (2007) and Szarkowski (1978 and 2007) with Barthes and Derrida from the course, any analytical method should consider up to five main aspects of a photograph's trajectory from camera to publication and consumption: the subject; the photographer's physical and technical choices; their personal attitudes; the display environment; and the viewer's circumstances.

The image chosen as the central subject of this essay is Bill Brandt's *Northumbrian coal miner eating his evening meal*, 1937 (fig. 1). The denoted contents comprise an unwashed middle-aged man eating a meal at a table, watched by a woman of similar age who is not eating. The room decoration is not contemporary. The image's title (part of the display environment) establishes the period, the event and the setting and is an example of the clarification a title can provide, Barthes' anchoring.

Superficially, this might be considered a documentary image, a genre that Brandt ostensibly built his reputation on, with his early photobooks, following which he gradually became a regular contributor to British magazines such as *Picture Post*. While little documentation has been found on this particular image or more generally about his visits to the North of England in the late 1930s, Brandt's manipulative and sometimes performative approach to seemingly documentary images is frequently described.

Hacking (2012, p.61) writes that 'some of the photographs taken by Brandt for his first book ... feature ... family and friends posing as characters in purportedly unmediated scenes of British social life' and Delany (2004, p.10) that 'his subjects had to be "in character", placed on a stage with the necessary props'.

The connoted aspects of *Northumbrian coal miner* are by definition subjective and personal to the viewer. Perhaps the most striking component (for me, the punctum of the image in Barthes' terms, defined by Bate (2007) as the 'aspect of the image that affects them in a particular and personal way') is the dirt on the subject's face, body and clothing which, we suspect from the title, to be coal dust: it seems strange to eat a meal without washing, however, pit-head baths were only introduced widely, starting in the 1930s (Wright and Herrera, 2017) and Orwell wrote that 'a majority of miners prefer to eat their meal first and wash afterwards' (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, quoted in Delany, p. 134). Given my upbringing (close to the South Wales coalfields and Aberfan), I am sensitive to mining issues and interpret the image as an illustration of the oppressive conditions imposed on the working class in post-Depression Britain, but Brandt, perhaps partly as a result of his privileged background, seems to have lacked social concerns in this context and 'never intended them ... for political propaganda' (Brand, quoted in Hacking, p.61) and did not, in any case, publish the images for more than a decade (MoMA, 2003, p.19).



Fig. 2 *Coal-Searcher Going Home to Jarrow*, 1937
© the estate of Bill Brandt

Other features of the photograph merit a mention: the female subject is not eating; a satchel hangs on the rear wall; the picture on that wall, partially obscured but showing a face, seemingly peering around the drying clothes. It is possible, even inevitable that the viewer will interpret such features in their own way, but given Brandt's practice of arranging the scenery and choreographing the subjects, no sensible conclusion can be reached on their implications. This is a manifestation of polysemy, a Barthian concept that Salkeld (2018, p.56) defines as a photograph's 'capacity for generating multiple meanings'.

It is not suggested that the *Northumbrian coal miner* or the *coal-searcher* (fig. 2) were portrayed by actors, but rather that Brandt might have taken a directorial approach to the portrait subjects and settings.

I had naively accepted Brandt's early British work as straightforwardly representational and was, at first, disappointed to learn in research for this essay that many of his images were staged.

Some photographers take what might be considered a more authentic approach to this mixture of documentary and portrait photography. Brandt was working in the 1930s. In the 1970s, Tish Murtha, from the North, but a photography student in South Wales, photographed one of her early series in the seedy New Found Out pub in Newport (fig. 3). As a 6th-form Newport schoolboy in the '70s who sometimes visited that pub at the end of a night out, I can state unequivocally that the regular clientele would not have accepted any directions from a police officer, much less a photographer: Murtha had to embed in the community and to gain their acceptance to work there. A detailed comparison of Brandt's 1938 *A Night in London* with Murtha's pleasingly anagrammatic 1983 *London by Night* will be pursued separately.



Fig. 3 from *Newport Pub*, 1977
© the estate of Tish Murtha

More recently, Jim Mortram, who dropped out of an art degree and returned to his native Dereham, Norfolk to care for his mother, documented the living conditions of friends and neighbours. His blog *Small Town Inertia* became an exhibition and

Jim Mortram
b: 1971
[Site - Wikipedia](#)



Fig. 4 *Kirsty and Si (with Bandit)*
from *Small Town Inertia*
© Jim Mortram

was published in book form in 2017. This level of relationship with his subjects constitutes the highest possible degree of knowledge and involvement and is likely to result in images that show them sympathetically and authentically, especially as he published the photographs alongside his subjects' extensive comments on their circumstances, in the case of fig. 4,

All the millionaires and that, they are sat there in their big houses and judge us. The benefits people always fob us off, every week. They say, 'You can't expect us to give you money straight away' and, yeah, that's alright but you don't know how we have to live, what state we have to live in and you're there going home to your nice food, to your brand new car, a seven-bedroom house and we're left here and no one has a care in the world.

—from *Small Town Inertia*, JA Mortram

Reconsidering Brandt's approach, I have always supposed that many photographers manipulate their subjects, for example, I cannot see how some of Cartier-Bresson's (fig. 5), Ronis' (fig. 6) and also Murtha's (fig. 7) street photographs can be anything other than contrived.



Fig. 5 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Rue Mouffetard, Paris*, 1952

Fig. 6 Willy Ronis, *Le Petit Parisien*, 1952

Fig. 7 Tish Murtha, from *Elswick Kids* 1978

Fig. 8 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936

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Even Lange's iconic *Migrant Mother* (fig. 8) has come under increasing scrutiny. First the whole basis of the FSA photography project has been undermined by the examination of director Roy Stryker's (perhaps) well-meaning but patronising instructions to his photographers (McDannell, 2004, p.20). Then, following an

investigation by Associated Press, the "Migrant Mother" (actually a Native American) herself, Florence Owens Thompson, spoke of the way Lange had exploited her and since her death in 1983, her family (the children in the photograph) have struggled to correct the myths and misconceptions that have grown up around Lange's image and Thompson herself (Dunn, 2002).

Ultimately, it can be argued that engagement with and understanding of a subject, leading to an honest representation, is more important than whether the furniture has been rearranged, and I should have been more concerned about Brandt's failure to do the former than with his tendency to do the latter. Nevertheless, Brandt's use of 'family and friends posing as characters in purportedly unmediated scenes' (Hacking) remains, in my view, a step too far in artifice.

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