

Mick Gidley, *Photography and the USA.*

Theodora Tsimpouki



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REFERENCES

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- 1 Mick Gidley's *Photography and the USA* is premised on the conviction that there is "a symbiotic connection" between the medium of photography and the American nation, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War. Given that *Photography and the USA* belongs to a series of books under the general title *Exposures* designed to explore photography from thematic perspectives or in relation to significant nationalities (i.e. "photography and literature," "photography and cinema," "photography and science," but also "photography and Australia," "photography and Africa," "photography and Italy"), definitional problems underlying the two referents of the book's title need not be addressed here. There is no interrogation of photography as a discursive concept nor there is an attempt to define the USA in terms other than spatial-geographical ones. As Gidley notes at the outset, "whether or not such a causal and one-to-one connection between nation and the medium is justified, the link itself exists" and, therefore, the approach adopted is "on photography and the USA" (7). Nevertheless, as the distinguished literary and cultural studies scholar that he is, Gidley returns—often implicitly rather than through explicit statements and analyses—to questions of definition and addresses the role of photography in the formation of American national identity as well as the historical value in photographs as visual records of the American past.
- 2 Organized around ideas of technology, history and the nature of the documentary, *Photography and the USA* may be read as a brief history of or an introduction to American photography from the nineteenth century to the present day while at the same time it

explores the role of the photographic image in the visual culture of the USA. As is most appropriate, the book begins with a cultural reading of American contributions to developments in photographic technology, primarily during the nineteenth century. One of them was the mass mechanization of the reproduction of photographs (1880), while yet another, a few years later, was George Eastman's production of the first roll film to equip his new, inexpensive Kodak camera. Twentieth century contributions to the medium include the development of photographically illustrated magazines, which promoted the photo-essay or story and gave rise to major exponents of the new form, such as W. Eugene Smith, Margaret Bourke-White or Gordon Parks. With the advent of digital photography, it has become impossible to adequately describe the stupendous growth of the medium, its cultural significance and a plurality of practices, but Gidley takes up the challenge with impressive eloquence and erudition.

- 3 One such area of investigation involves the ways in which photography has intersected with some of the major themes of American history, including the Western frontier, immigration, race and racism, the rise of the city and the growth of consumerism. As "documents of the American life" in particular historical instances, Gidley selects photographs that seem to have some authenticity not only as visual records but also as social history. Yet, knowing too well that singling out images for discussion from the sheer volume of archival imagery is in itself a critical judgment, he repeatedly emphasizes his own active role as the author of the book in the selection and interpretation of images. Thus, Gidley chooses to discuss some frontier photographs which have become iconic in their depiction of the West. Though many historians nowadays would not necessarily agree with Frederick Jackson Turner's claim that western expansion is *the* determinant in U.S. history, Gidley contends that Western iconography retains its potency not only in keeping up with its orthodox, mythologizing status but also with inviting the tradition's subversion, as is the case of Lee Friedlander's famous view of Mt Rushmore or John Pfahl's "altered landscape" of Ansel Adam's *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico*.
- 4 But, photographs do not merely record historical events; they sometimes are integral to the meaning of the events, constitutive to their nature, to the extent that they might be termed "symbolic documents." Featuring many important images of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine on immigrant and child life, of Frances B. Johnston on Indians and African-Americans and of Edward S. Curtis on Native Americans, the chapter on "Documents" foregrounds the author's belief, echoing Alan Trachtenberg, in the visual power of the photograph to perform a social act. Without underestimating their artistic virtuosity, Gidley acknowledges the influence of the photographers fostered by the FSA project (Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, in particular) in creating the image of the Depression in the U.S. After its demise, the FSA became an inspirational force in other projects which undertook to document areas of American life—country courthouses, monuments and other architectural buildings—though the images produced, Gidley reminds us, cannot be separated from the representational tasks assigned to them by the institutions commissioning and circulating them.
- 5 The last chapter of the book, aptly entitled "Emblems," features photographs which have an enduring, symbolic significance: it includes presidential faces, the star spangled banner, JFK, iconic landscapes, etc, all of which, once again point to the potency of national visual symbols. Obviously, these photographs' cumulative effect does not depend solely on the subject matter but also on the mode of its visual representation. Here,

Gidley's analysis revolves around two distinct, equally popular and simultaneous traditions of photography, the "straight" photography of Alfred Stieglitz or of the "Group f/74," which aimed at representing "the thing in itself," and the "mixed modes" tradition where the photographic image was openly manipulated and was perceived as such. Though Gidley favors the straight tradition which he considers dominant partly because it bears witness to abiding themes of American history, he is as insightful in his visual analysis of more experimental and abstract images.

- 6 *Photography and the USA* is an excellent introduction for students of American studies or the visual arts, as well as the general reader fascinated by the role of the image in American history and culture.

AUTHOR

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens