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## Errol MORRIS, *Believing is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography)*

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## RÉFÉRENCE

New York, The Penguin Press, 2011, 336 p.  
ISBN : 978-1594203015, 40 \$

- 1 There is much to find exhilarating, and much to find frustrating, in Errol Morris's *Believing is Seeing* (*Observations on the Mysteries of Photography*). Morris is among America's most prominent documentary filmmakers, and the book originates in a blog he has written on the New York Times website since 2007 about conundrums of evidence, representation, and credulity in photography and documentary filmmaking<sup>1</sup>. The selections adapted here (all about still photography) remain essentially stand-alone case studies. The near-constant context is war: Morris examines images made in the Crimean War, the American-led war in Iraq, the Israel-Lebanon conflict of 2006, and the American Civil War. But his real themes are given in the headings by which the six chapters are grouped: "Intentions of the Photographer," "Photographs Reveal and Conceal," "Captioning, Propaganda, and Fraud," and "Photography and Memory." Each chapter takes the form of a detective story. What has a particular (iconic) photograph been taken to mean and to prove? What convictions underlay the passage from photographic "seeing" to the illusion of *knowing*, and what were the consequences? Can deeper investigation reveal information that compels us to re-examine whether the photograph in question offers the "proof" we thought it did?
- 2 The book also partakes of an important tradition: some of our most influential theories of photographs' power as evidence, and of the ethics of photographic viewing and credulity, have come from working artists (such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler)<sup>2</sup>.

Morris, however, does something that earlier critic-artists did not: he opens up the process of inquiry to his readers. As if transposing the *process* of making a documentary film to the page, Morris narrates his investigations in the first person, seeks out experts and transcribes long interviews with them, weighs their disagreements, describes his formulation of new questions and pursuit of unorthodox research tactics, and illustrates copious conflicting evidence. Each chapter builds up a montage of opinions, clues, and possibilities (the typefaces and layout help distinguish various voices, and separate research data from Morris's meta-commentary) – a format that engages readers in assessing the disparate pieces for themselves. What differentiates *Believing is Seeing* from a previous generation's attacks on the evidentiary status of photographs is that Morris never treats the medium as falsifying "reality." He is more interested in the prejudices and assumptions of viewers: how do pre-existing beliefs condition what we assume about a photographer's motives and a photograph's relationship to the world, and how do they shape what we "believe" in and about a photograph? His central insights are not theoretically sophisticated, but this is not a mark against him. *Believing is Seeing* aims for a broad audience, and it often succeeds in making questions of epistemology accessible, easy to examine, and politically urgent.

- 3 The book starts with—indeed the whole project was launched by—Morris's challenge to Susan Sontag's statement in *Regarding the Pain of Others*<sup>3</sup> that one photograph by Roger Fenton, depicting cannonballs *on* a road during the Crimean War was "staged," while another "previous" image by Fenton depicting the cannonballs *off* the road was not. "Staged" is a loaded term that presupposes deceit. But, wonders Morris, was the charge warranted? On what grounds? Furthermore, how did Sontag know which photograph came first? Why should we believe her chronology, upon which all else rests? How did her desire to read one scenario as having had its subject "tampered with" shape her account of this image's meaning, historical significance, and, especially, its moral import? Here is the first instance of exhilaration: Morris spends the first pages shredding most of the arguments that have been proffered by experts on Fenton, demonstrating that none of these scholars possesses a convincing arsenal of proof regarding which image came first, or why, or what the meaning of either possible order would be. What each thinks is commonsense fact, he argues, is little more than an instinct about what Fenton's intentions must have been. The issue may seem trivial, but since it is so often yoked to claims about what it meant to render and learn of war via photographs for the first time, the implications are vast.
- 4 Morris' quest to determine which of Fenton's images was made first takes him halfway around the world and enlists thrillingly unexpected people and tactics, from Russian tour guides to forensic specialists and cannonball measurements to digital shadow overlays. The conclusion teaches us basically nothing of importance. But the research – the overwhelming lengths of it, the sources we don't think to use, the factors we don't think to look at, the hypotheticals we fail to imagine, the guesses we make about photographers' intentions, the confusion of evidence (or its absence) with logic – teaches us everything. The questions pursued, as Morris points out, lead us straight to the "most vexing issues in photography – about posing, about the intentions of the photographer, about the nature of photographic evidence" (p. 67), exposing how *everyone*, sometimes, substitutes hunches, beliefs, and moral instincts for the limits of seeing and knowing.

- 5 The serious consequences of such assumptions, of unwarranted faith combined with the rush to proclaim meaning, is argued most effectively in the following two chapters on the notorious Abu Ghraib prison photographs taken by American soldiers. The book's central claim is here, for good reason: "Photographs provide evidence, but no shortcut to reality. It is often said that seeing is believing. But we do not form our beliefs on the basis of what we see; rather, what we see is often determined by our beliefs. Believing is seeing, not the other way around" (p. 93). What Morris uncovered in researching the famous photograph of Sabrina Harman grinning over an iced corpse makes for the book's strongest case that our desire for photographs to provide visual proof of unproven events is alive, well, and dangerous. The appalling image, universally assumed to "show" that Harman tortured the pictured victim, was used by the U.S. government to convict *her* of abuse – while, Morris contends, deflecting attention from CIA personnel operating secretly in the prison who were never charged in the death. Morris's painstaking reconstruction of events (within the photographic record and without) leads him to conclude: "The photograph of Sabrina smiling over al-Jamadi's body both reveals his death and conceals his killer" (p. 118). Here Morris proves himself as committed a moral critic as Sontag, arguing that the CIA's torture program in Iraq still has not been fully investigated, and urging the story of Sabrina Harman's photograph be used to exert pressure for accountability.
- 6 These first three chapters work because Morris so effectively argues that even when incontrovertible proof can't be gleaned from photographs, the specificity of our questions matters, as does the *location* of truth. The point is not to condemn photographs as deceptions or failures, but to understand that photographs necessarily omit and conceal more than they present to view. They aren't answers; they're questions, problems, mysteries. As Morris writes of another Abu Ghraib torture-scandal picture, "the photograph should be a constant reminder – not of how photographs can be true or false – but of how we can make false inferences from a photograph" (p. 85).
- 7 And yet, this book can be as misguided as it is thrilling. From a scholarly point of view, this becomes apparent in the "The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock," a chapter that revisits accusations of fakery lodged against various Resettlement Association/Farm Security Administration photographs of the 1930s. First, what is a chapter on RA/FSA images doing in a book where all the other chapters concern photography's relationship to war? We want to know whether Walker Evans rearranged, added, or subtracted items in the Gudgers' Hale County cabin, Morris argues, because "The placement of an alarm clock or a pair of boots may seem like a petty issue, but it goes to the heart of what documentary photography is. It goes to the difference between posing and deliberate fakery" (p. 157). Well, no. Morris makes a common mistake – treating "documentary" of the American 1930s as a benchmark for photographic fidelity to the world-as-found – while seeking to demonstrate that "even" those photographs have long generated debate about what the standards of such fidelity should be. But worse, it typifies how Morris's research methods sometimes go astray by ignoring the state of scholarship.
- 8 Documentary was an inchoate and contested term in the Thirties, but almost never were its various theorists and proponents concerned with transcribing unmediated information (most would have scoffed that such an activity was mere record-making). Instead this provisional term offered a platform for experiments in the interpretation of reality, reality already understood as contingent on the photographer's frame of

reference – or in Evan’s case, for exploring the mechanized mediation of modern consciousness. Morris misses this in treating all RA/FSA photographs as interchangeably governed by the same evidentiary standards (they were not), in eliding Evans’ Hale County images with his RA/FSA work (an error both factual and conceptual), and failing to acknowledge scholarship of the last twenty years that could help elucidate Evans’ agenda regarding “truth” as that of an avant-garde artist, decidedly not a journalist<sup>4</sup>. Instead he foments a debate between two scholars whose work is woefully outdated: William Stott, whose 40-year-old text characterizes documentary as a propagandistic, sentimental, non-art genre transcended only by the work of Evans; and James Curtis, whose book grounded in 1980s ideology critique argues that some of the most famous FSA photographs were posed or staged, contrary to the unvarnished reportage *he* claims they promised<sup>5</sup>. Both relying on a historically inaccurate opposition of documentary to art, their argument reduces the issue of “fraud” to whether photographers re-arranged what was in front of their lenses, misconstruing both the artistic experiment of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and a context in which “documentary” was not yet a shorthand for the promise of neutrality.

- 9 Morris, of all people, ought to recognize when unexamined beliefs lead people to ask the wrong questions about what a photograph purports to offer its viewers. But this problem bedevils all the book’s later chapters, including one on a single trope (children’s toys in the street) found in photojournalism of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, and another in which Morris plumbs the memories of one family over 150 years as connected to and through an image of three children found clutched in a dead soldier’s hand at Gettysburg. In these cases, Morris lets his interviewees shape the terms of inquiry to an extent that obscures Morris’s own agenda, leaving the lessons of these chapters muddled. Morris is at his best when he throws himself into first-hand research to reveal how our intuitions lead us into unwarranted assumptions about specific images. But the book’s second half suggests his curiosity alone doesn’t always break new ground; occasionally it even leads him down rabbit-holes that isolate him from vital scholarly conversations or sacrifice the broader relevance a topic might have afforded.
- 10 Scholars will not turn to *Believing is Seeing* as a reference work. But certain chapters would be excellent teaching material, as they open windows onto avenues of research more creative and wide ranging than can be found in more traditional scholarship. What makes the book unconventional might also be its greatest value in an era when students learn fewer hands-on research skills and scholars often emphasize provocative interpretation over careful accounting of their research techniques and deductive reasoning. Even if students cannot marshal Morris’s resources, they may use his models to identify what questions have not yet been asked, and will become more adept at tracing how the belief of “seeing” produces claims to knowing. To follow Morris’s intellectually generous forms of skepticism, to dive into multifarious research alongside him, to explore the contingencies of photographic representation afresh, and to debate the stakes of his investigations – all this can be thrilling for students and accomplished scholars alike.

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## NOTES

1. See <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/errol-morris/>.
2. Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," 1976/1978, in *Photography Against the Grain: essays and photo works, 1973-1983* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984) and Martha Rosler, "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," 1981/1982, in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
3. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).
4. A good starting place is Maria Hambourg et al., *Walker Evans* (Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 2000). For recent work that treats Evans within the experimental terrain of documentary as I have described it here, see Jessica May, "'The Work of an Artist': Walker Evans's *American Photographs*" in Sharon Corwin et al., *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Amon Carter Museum, Colby College Museum of Art, and University of California Press, 2010).
5. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).