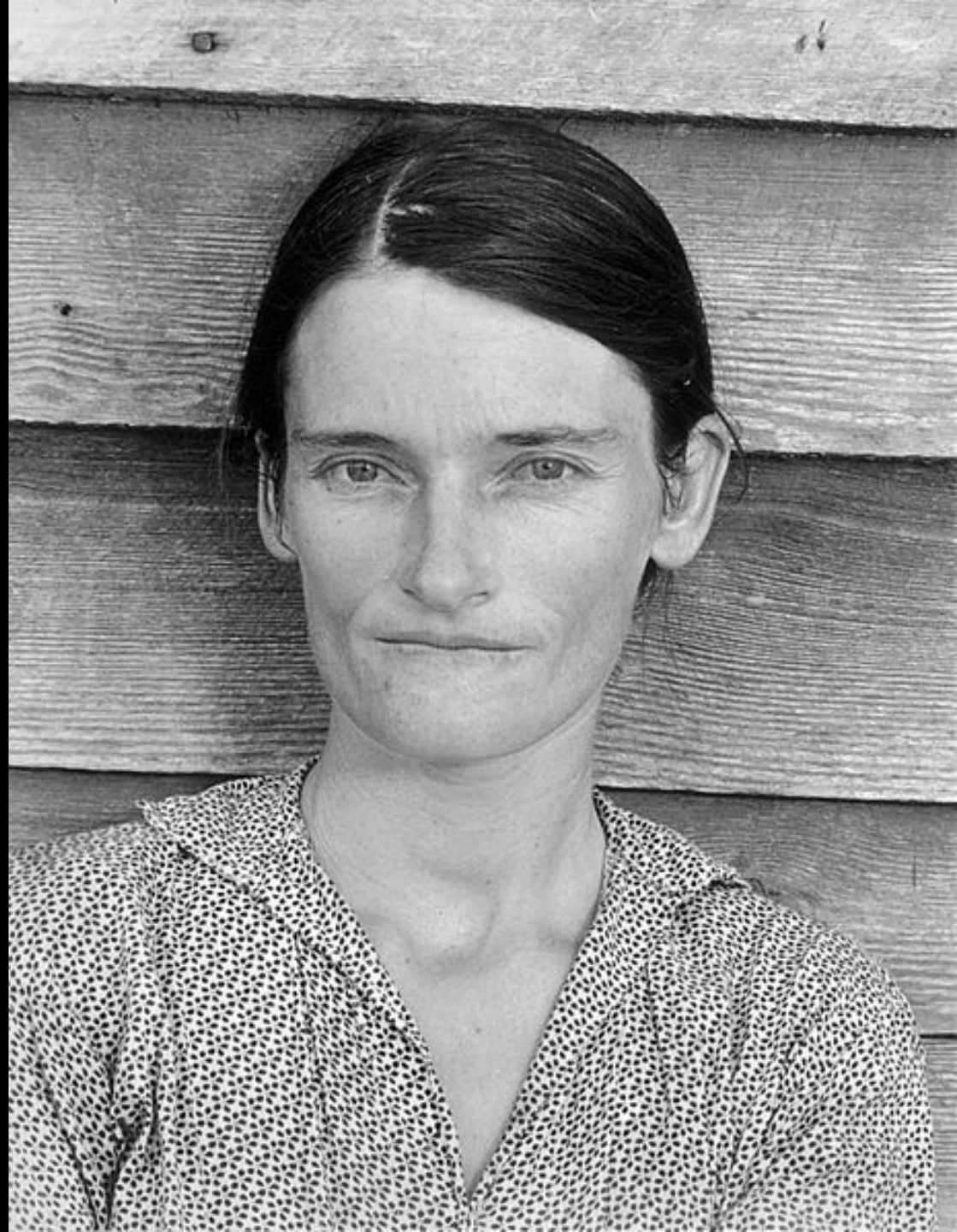


Illustrated Susan Sontag

“The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s (among them Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee) would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject’s face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. “

Walker Evans,
Allie Mae Burroughs
Sharecroppers Wife, 1936



David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson,
Miss Ellen Milne, Miss Mary Watson, Miss Watson, Miss Agnes Milne and Sarah Wilson,
1843 – 1847
www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/hill-adamson

Even for such early masters as David Octavius Hill and Julia Margaret Cameron who used the camera as a means of getting painterly images, the point of taking photographs was a vast departure from the aims of painters.



“I always thought of photography as a naughty thing to do—that was one of my favorite things about it,” Diane Arbus wrote, “and when I first did it I felt very perverse.” Being a professional photographer can be thought of as naughty, to use Arbus’s pop word, if the photographer seeks out subjects considered to be disreputable, taboo, marginal. But naughty subjects are harder to find these days. And what exactly is the perverse aspect of picture-taking?

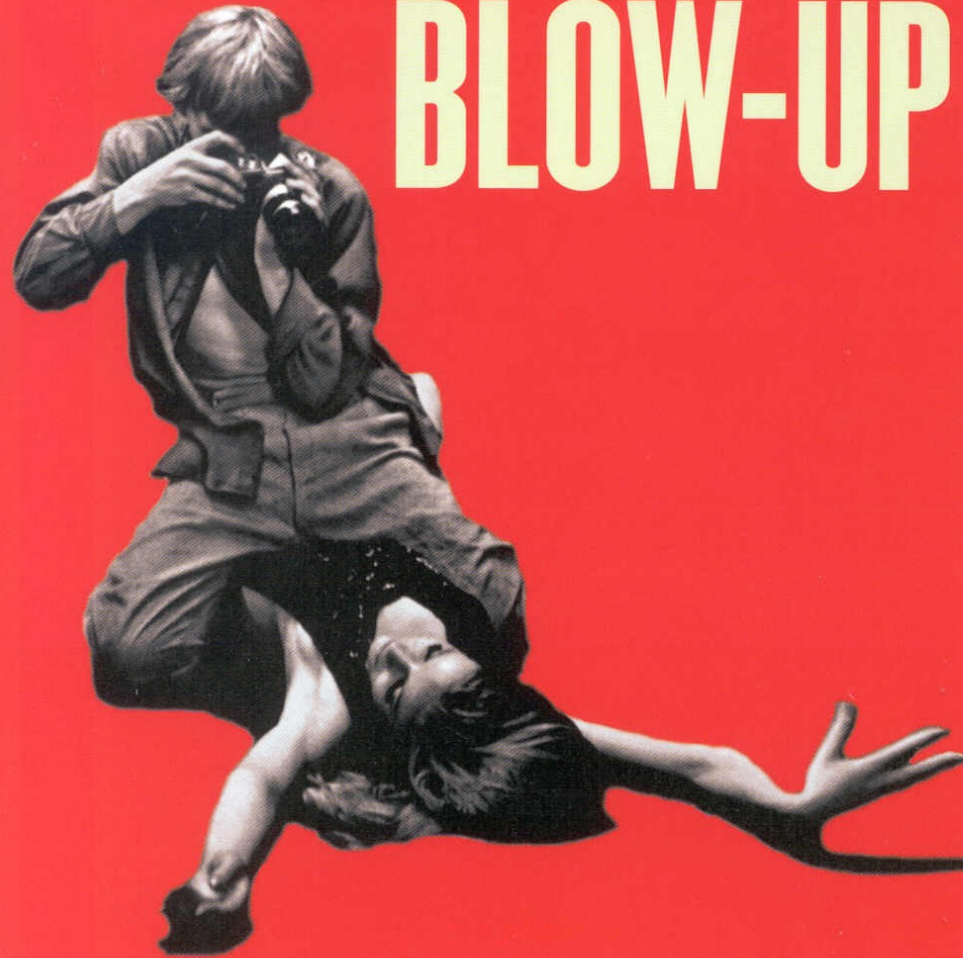
Diane Arbus
Patriotic Young Man with Flag, NYC
1967



In *Blowup* (1966),
Antonioni has the
fashion photographer
hovering convulsively
over Veruschka's body
with his camera
clicking.

A FILM BY MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

BLOW-UP



VANESSA REDGRAVE

DAVID HEMMINGS

SARAH MILES





The moody, intricately textured Paris of Atget and Brassai is mostly gone. Like the dead relatives and friends preserved in the family album, whose presence in photographs exorcises some of the anxiety and remorse prompted by their disappearance, so the photographs of neighborhoods now torn down, rural places disfigured and made barren, supply our pocket relation to the past.

Eugène Atget
La Villette,
fille publique faisant le quart, 19e
April 1921

The photographs Mathew Brady and his colleagues took of the horrors of the battlefields did not make people any less keen to go on with the Civil War.



Confederate dead behind a stone wall at Fredericksburg, VA



The political understanding that many Americans came to in the 1960s would allow them, looking at the photographs Dorothea Lange took of Nisei on the West Coast being transported to internment camps in 1942, to recognize their subject for what it was—a crime committed by the government against a large group of American citizens.

3, 1942 — Manzanar, California. Dust storm at this War Relocation Authority center where evacuees of Japanese ancestry are spending the duration.

Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again. Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1972—a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the war than a hundred hours of televised barbarities.



The Terror of War, Nick Ut, 1972

The quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed, the exploited, the starving, and the massacred also depends on the degree of their familiarity with these images. Don McCullin's photographs of emaciated Biafrans in the early 1970s had less impact for some people than Werner Bischof's photographs of Indian famine victims in the early 1950s because those images had become banal, and the photographs of Tuareg families dying of starvation in the sub-Saharan that appeared in magazines everywhere in 1973 must have seemed to many like an unbearable replay of a now familiar atrocity exhibition



For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously



The Liberation of Belsen Concentration Camp April 1945: A British Army bulldozer pushes bodies into a mass grave at Belsen. - 19 April 1945



Of course, photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past: for example, Jacob Riis's images of New York squalor in the 1880s are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian.

Jacob Riis, Five cents a spot unauthorized lodging at Bayard Street Tenement c1890 from