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Dmitri Shalin Interview with J. David Sapir about Erving Goffman entitled "Seeing the Photographs Erving said, "Do You Think That Those Pictures Say Anything about Reality? Absolutely not. . ."

J. David Sapir
Virginia University

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Seeing the Photographs Erving said, "Do You Think That Those Pictures Say Anything about Reality? Absolutely not. . ."

This memoir is written by Dr. J. David Sapir, Professor Emeritus at the Department of Anthropology, Virginia University, and it posted in the Goffman Archives with his permission. The extended paper from which this excerpt is taken can be found on this page, <http://people.virginia.edu/~ds8s/WE-documentarystyle.pdf>.

[Posted 3.3.14]

My reading in preparation for this symposium led me to an essay by Max Kozloff a writer on photography (one of the more sensible ones)—which appeared in *Art in America* in 1980 (collected in his *The Privileged Eye*). The article reports the substance of a conference that took place in New Haven, Connecticut in 1979 (The Voices in Photographic Criticism Symposium, October, 1979). Kozloff noted the divided nature of the group where each member was intent on defending his or her particular critical turf. The lack of common voice disappointed Kozloff though he reported hearing "brief scraps of open-minded comment, and three talks in which common sense took sail." One of the talks "demonstrated that information and expression are inseparable in photographic statements." That talk was given by Howard Becker. I believe that the best way to come to a gloss on Walker's "documentary style" is to run with Becker's observation. For Walker Evans, surely, the style and the subject are one an inseparable.

Although Kozloff singled out Becker and a couple of others for praise, he devoted much of his report to those who in one way or another denied, in contrast to Becker, the factualness of photographs ... Joel Synder saying that "Carlyle was there for Mrs. Cameron - where else would he be?---but her metaphors were the only things that counted." For me, the comments by Erving Goffman, who was there to comment on Becker, are most interesting. Goffman, an uncanny observer of public interaction, took a particularly hard line. To quote Kozloff's report:

"The sociologist Erving Goffman outflanked all the other participants, not only in his use of technical language, but in the "hardness" of his criteria for accepting photographic knowledge. With his insistence that science is

science and that we all tend to over-read photos, he retroactively stiffened what was already an ungenerous attitude toward image content."

Let me insert an antidote. Seven years before the New Haven conference I had a show at the University of Pennsylvania's University Museum of about 100 of my Jóola (Senegal, West Africa) photos. After the show was over the photos returned home to sit in my living room, where I strung out in a row, about 20 of them, each propped up on the ledge of 36" high wainscot. The photos were bled-mounted (without borders) on Styrofoam board. This followed the old tradition in photojournalism where one photo was said to run into the next.

Erving Goffman (the Goffman of the conference) and Joel Sherzer the ethnolinguist (now at the University of Texas), came to pick me up on the way to dinner. Seeing the photographs: Joel said, "You have a lot of friends here." Erving said, "Do you think that those pictures say anything about reality? Absolutely not. . ." I recall more the heat than the substance of his harangue. I did not wish to argue simply because I had never troubled myself to ask whether the photos "represented reality" or not. The photos, in their ensemble, said, or rather illustrated or better yet pointed to a something, concerning my African friends, that I never thought to record in words. In fact, that I could scarcely conceive of describing in words. Perhaps the photos caught no more than a "brightening glance."

In truth, probably the jolt that brought on Erving's squawk was the mass of photographs walking around the room. I truly believe that Erving was unnerved by the unprotected, unenclosed, unframed, uncontrolled photographs that were simply there. In contrast, I had on the wall several Edward Weston's appropriately framed (Guadeloupe, the Cabbage Leaf and a sitting Charis Wilson nude.). After attacking my wandering Africans he turned to the Weston's, and with sly, but genuine, relief said, "Ah, Art!"