Impossible Closure: Realism and Durational Aesthetics in Susan Meiselas's Nicaragua

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Realism and Durational Aesthetics

Perhaps no two words are more commonly associated with photography than *documentary* and *realism*—a fact that has made this medium of long-standing interest to scholars of the realist novel.[1] Despite the frequency of their use, however, what constitutes a "documentary" image or makes a photograph "realist," or even what makes photography a realist medium, remains a point of contention among critics and historians in the field (much as scholars of literature continue to question the criteria for realist fiction). Is documentary a genre, a style, or an approach? Is documentary's singular impulse, like that of many of realist novels, the description of a particular subject matter (Miller)? Is photography's indexical status—the fact that the photographic image (at least with analog technology) bears a physical connection to that which once stood in front of the camera's lens—somehow a guarantor of the medium's realist credentials? Is such an understanding of photography's ontological status still relevant in the digital era?

Further complicating the situation: *realism* and *documentary* also share a history. Though this shared history dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when photographers such as William Henry Fox Talbot imagined that photographs could potentially be used as a kind of evidence in legal spaces—such as courtrooms—the relationship between documentary and realism became especially fraught in the 1970s and 1980s (C. Armstrong 107–78). For it was during this time when a number of artists, scholars, and critics sought to destabilize and redefine documentary by, in the words of Sarah Miller, "dismantling photography's supposed truth claims, especially as such claims could be thought of as purchased with an instrumental realism serving to equate photographic representation with natural knowledge" (Miller 2). Artist-scholars such as Allan Sekula, for example, wrote about how documentary photography of the past stood for the medium's "essential realism . . . both

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[1] See, for instance, N. Armstrong on the interdependence between mid-nineteenth-century literary realism and the newly emergent medium of photography and, more recently, Novak's work, which also emphasizes the artifice entailed in both fiction and photography.

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product and handmaiden of positivism" in a manner that serves to "ideologically naturalize the eye of the observer" (Sekula 56). And he made work, such as his enormously important photo book about the maritime industry, *Fish Story*, which was self-critical about its own ideological production of meaning.

In this article I seek to demonstrate what such questions regarding visual media can contribute to a special issue, "Worlding Realisms," that is primarily concerned with the modes of narrative realism found in literary texts. Like realist fiction, photography and documentary are, in the terms set forth in the introduction to this special issue, "both constitutively *worlded* (in taking the material world for its premise) and *worlding* (in making new ways of seeing, knowing, thinking, and being palpable to those worlds)." In taking on this task, in no way do I seek to write a complete history of the concept of realism in photography. Rather, in describing how photographic "realism" has been diversely conceived, defined, and redefined, my first point is to emphasize that the term *realism* as it is used in the visual arts—and I would say this is especially so for lens-based media—exceeds any specific meaning.[2] "Instead of one realism," write Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens, "a full-fledged history of variegated and competing meanings, interpretations and assessments of the concept of realism" have emerged (8). Second, and with the address to literary critics especially in mind, I seek to add something new to the discussion of photographic realism by exploring its temporal dimension: by looking, in other words, at how durational experience is latent in still photography, or at least in some still photographs. Counterintuitively, perhaps, I want to propose that we can imagine this temporal quality productively by thinking of still photography in terms of what literary scholars think of as narrative. In this, I am guided by two questions: First, simply, in what respects might still photography be considered a narrative medium? And second, how might the surprising duration and narrativity of the ostensibly still image figure as key components to a realist conception of the medium? I address these questions through a consideration of Susan Meiselas's photographs of the Nicaraguan Revolution in order to construct a theory of durational aesthetics that takes into account the simultaneous singularity and ongoingness of the photographic as well as the historical event.

Photography is, as I have said, often associated with realism because of the medium's indexical status—what historians of photography identify as its special relationship to the real. In analog photography, light bounces off the figure or object in front of the camera and is registered on light-sensitive film inside the camera's box, and then eventually developed and reproduced in the darkroom. So unlike a drawing or painting, the object depicted in a photograph is physically connected (via light bouncing off its contours) to its representation. Critics, especially in the 1980s, felt that too much emphasis on this aspect of photography led viewers to assume too simple and uncritical of a relationship between the world and its representation. But the fact that photographs, in the most straightforward way, have the ability to look like the world they portray, that they are legible and accessible to viewers unfamiliar with codes and rules of abstraction, is

[2] Not all critics share my assessment that contemporary lens-based practice is more affected by conceptions of realism than other media. See, for example, Oliver.

for me a vital component to the formation of any realist-oriented interpretation of lens-based media. What is key to recognize, however, is that such legibility does not mean that all facts are set and relationships determined. To the contrary, what the camera makes legible offers no guarantee of absolute objectivity, or a sterile and stable field of vision, as will become clear in my reading of Meiselas's work below.

Realism, as I envision it here, moves away from an idea of objective representation and toward an aesthetic approach that takes into account contingency and the not pictured—that something that the camera's lens does not see and therefore cannot reproduce, literally—but which is there.[3] Realism in this way exceeds that which is actually pictured and functions as a generative force that prompts engagement—in the case of Meiselas, historical engagement as well as interpretative agency. The realism I speak of throughout this paper and in relation to Meiselas, then, is not passively recapitulated by the camera, not merely presented; rather, it is flexible, demanding, and talkative. Much like a narrative form such as the novel, lens-based realism can move people and create new knowledge; it carries its own reality and often transcends the representation of whatever it's showing to affect viewers in unpredictable ways.

Still, that thing a photograph depicts, its referent, is the starting point. This is one reason why Susan Meiselas's work offers such a compelling case study for the temporality and narrativity of photography. In 1978, Meiselas traveled to Nicaragua to photograph what scholars of history and the novel might think of as a world-historical event in motion: the increasingly visible militant resistance to that country's American-backed dictator, President Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Meiselas's photographs of the ensuing Nicaraguan Revolution, widely published in papers such as the *New York Times* and magazines such as *Newsweek*, came to define that struggle visually for the global North. Yet Meiselas was dissatisfied with the way the mainstream media used her pictures, and so in 1981 she produced her own photo book, simply titled *Nicaragua*, with the hope that it would restore some of the historical complexity lost to her images through their publication in the commercial press. But after the book's publication (and mixed reviews), Meiselas remained dissatisfied. So, still looking for a way to create historical texture and multiple framings for individual images and the events they represent, she returned to Nicaragua in 1990. This time she came with a film crew, who recorded her as she revisited the sites she had photographed in 1978–79, and as she searched for—and sometimes found and then interviewed—the people who populated those images. In documenting this process of return, the resulting film, *Pictures from a Revolution*, presents a compelling conceptualization of the unfolding nature of the historical image where former political engagements are thrust into present realization such that the film constructs a dynamic interpenetration of past and future.[4]

[3] I develop this conception of realism (as based in legibility and contingency) in my earlier work on the photographer Berenice Abbott (Weissman).

[4] Duganne has discussed Meiselas in a related way; she has mobilized John Berger's idea of an "alternative photographic practice" (*About Looking* 60) to argue that Meiselas's photographs

As a result of Meiselas's extended engagement with Nicaragua and the multiple components and various iterations of her Nicaraguan work, the idea of duration—like that of realism—takes on a number of meanings.[5] On one level, duration refers simply to Meiselas's long-term commitment to documenting a revolutionary and postrevolutionary process that occurs over a substantial amount of time. But Meiselas's photography and film works not only depict a historical duration; they also produce a durational experience in viewing, especially as Meiselas's images are bound up with the unfolding of a durational process, constructed by moving from one image to the next, as in a book or in a film, such that images become inextricable from their narrative succession. Moreover, *Pictures from a Revolution* reflects on earlier photographs: by "documenting" one medium (photography) with another (film), Meiselas's documentary project expands—or rather, reveals—the temporal frame of that initial artifact. And finally, the duration that occurs within the act of reception leads to an impossible closure on meaning production, which parallels the way reality is experienced, endowing Meiselas's photo-filmic project with a specifically temporally expressed—a kind of "photo-chronographic"—realism.

It is worth reiterating that, unlike Deleuze's rejection of the everyday, chrono-linear concept of time, the model of realism and durational aesthetics that I seek to formulate here maintains the importance of linear narrative as, in part, a way of grasping and making intelligible, or narrating, historical causation.[6] Again this is not to say that artists like Meiselas are naive about representation (any more than the linearity of a realist novel implies naïveté about the constructedness of narrative time). This is not at all the case. In fact, the manner by which Meiselas inserts her still images from 1978–79 into the moving ones of *Pictures from a Revolution* points to her own awareness of the contradictions that remain unresolved in the images' framing. A key point of durational aesthetics, as I am mapping it out here, then, is to capture historical change or movement through the dialectical interplay of stillness and motion such that change is represented through the depiction of its opposite. This model of looking at and conceiving images provides a way to think about not only how images behave over time, but also how a certain form of representation itself figures elapsed time.

This is no small point, for representation that gives a sense of elapsed time can, I believe, more easily depict the relations that events, actions, and structures bear to

create a "living context," thus avoiding sensationalism and effectively becoming part of one's political memory.

[5] My use of the term *duration* in this essay is not meant as a specific reference to either Henri Bergson or Gilles Deleuze, although I am indebted to their work, of course. The interpenetration of past and present, for instance, is in keeping with Bergson's conception of time as lived experience or that the present is a dynamic of past and future. My use of the term "durational aesthetics," however, is more in response to Nicolas Bourriaud's term "relational aesthetics," frequently presented as a mode of art-making engaged in creating experiences and addressing social relations that ultimately neglects the mechanics of collective action, which often involve processes—political work—that build over time.

[6] Deleuze, rather than thinking chronologically, and in keeping with his networks or rhizomatic approach, fuses the pastness of a recorded event (the virtual) with the presentness of its viewing (the actual). See Rodowick 79–111.

their historical context.[7] It is also how still photographs can acquire transformative potential in shaping the way political subjects identify and recognize themselves, a vital precondition for the formation of politicized individuals and communities. An emphasis *in* representation *on* duration in human exchange characterizes Meiselas's Nicaraguan work such that her manner of playing—in both her still photographs and the film—with the gestures of looking and waiting, moving and touching, and speaking and listening works to visualize (and perhaps even create) a public, or a community that evolves *over time*. It allows the radical past to do more than just emerge as a flash image in our time, as Benjamin might say. And in this way, durational aesthetics becomes a way to refuse the temporality of defeat, a way to refuse narrative closure while maintaining narrative as the source of causation.[8]

Nicaragua

In 1978, Susan Meiselas traveled to Nicaragua to photograph the country's increasingly visible revolutionary underground, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN. Motivated to take the trip by a *New York Times* article about the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who had been editor of the country's largest newspaper, *La Prensa*, and an outspoken critic of the country's dictatorship, Meiselas claims to have had no real idea of what she would photograph upon her arrival (or even much knowledge of Nicaraguan politics). Though already a member of Magnum Photos, the photography collective started by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1947, Meiselas arrived in Nicaragua as an independent photojournalist taking photographs on spec. This meant newspaper and magazine editors could use the pictures she sent to Magnum but were not directing her shots or requesting specific kinds of content. She had, in other words, a certain amount of freedom; she also had a fair amount of success. The first time a mainstream American journal published her photographs was July 30, 1978, when the *New York Times* magazine printed a number of her photographs, including one on its cover (figure 1), which shows three masked Sandinista figures with their arms outstretched toward the center of the image, holding homemade contact bombs.

The image is remarkable for how close it brings us to the action of the revolution and for how intimate, compassionate, and inclusive the view feels. The colors, the outstretched hands, and the seeming material presence—the realness—of the bombs (or rocks), and the way we see the rebels' hands touching, reaching for improvised weapons, makes it feel like we too are part of this movement and that we too could reach out and grab these objects. It is an image that takes sides, that

[7] Think here also of Auerbach's demand that realism be "historistic" (388, 418, 431). See also White on this concept.

[8] If "durational aesthetics" is conceived in some ways as a response to Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics," then concepts such as Badiou's "event" as well as other forms of politics that privilege spontaneism or continuous disruption serve as the other model against which my conception of duration is modeled.

Figure 1. *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 1978

situates us as being with them.[9] This kind of sympathetic portrayal of the Sandinistas in the mainstream press might seem surprising today, but the ethos of Meiselas's image matched the article's position. It is easy to forget that in 1978, when this picture was taken and published, Jimmy Carter was still president, and the anticommunist rhetoric that Ronald Reagan used to frame and legitimate the US position on Nicaragua after 1981 had yet to emerge as official Cold War doctrine. The article, written by Alan Riding, declared that "[t]he revolution taking place in Nicaragua today is no ordinary political movement pitting left against right or civilians against the military. Rather, it is a national mutiny in which almost every sector of the country—left and right, rich and poor—is united against a dynastic dictatorship. . . . Even more unusual, it is a revolution made possible by the 'betrayal' of the Somoza family by two of its oldest allies—the wealthy business elite and the United States Government" (39).

Nevertheless, as the revolution progressed, Meiselas grew increasingly frustrated with the way in which corporate print media used and circulated her pictures. In September 1978, just two months after the *New York Times Magazine* cover story, *Time* ran a piece titled "A Battle Ends, a War Begins." The editors included a number of Meiselas's photographs in a way that, she felt, simplified the complexity of Nicaraguan discontent and overly romanticized the Sandinista rebels. Those who remember the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement in the 1980s may recall how the Sandinistas were frequently heroicized, admired not only for standing up to the US government after Reagan took office, but also for the way in which they embraced artists and poets as leaders and for what was seen at the time as a less dogmatic rhetoric than that of Fidel Castro in Cuba.[10] Michael Denning's phrase "romance of the Revolution," used for characterizing those Americans who traveled to Mexico or the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s, could be applied to some of the enthusiastic supporters in the United States of the FSLN (12–13). But more upsetting to Meiselas than the role her photographs may or may not have

[9] The photographer Paul Strand, who during his lifetime was a strong proponent of realist photography, explained his thoughts about realism at a 1946 film conference in Perugia, Italy. Barberie describes, "The realism he [Strand] advocates involves, in his words, a dynamic approach to everyday life that engages the changing world, avoids treating subjects as immutable or timeless, and represents to ordinary people the conflicts and heroism of their own lives." At the conference, Strand called for a realism that "takes sides" (2).

[10] A number of Meiselas's photographs do lend themselves to a kind of romanticization, especially those that depict vibrant colors and the gloriously draped FSLN flag. But I do not believe that the kind of leftist romantic appropriation Meiselas fears necessarily rules out the realist or durational aspect of her production.

played in the construction of a romanticized revolution was the fact that *Time* ignored her instructions not to print images that revealed the faces of teenage rebels for fear that Somoza's National Guard would see these images and take revenge. Later, in 1989, Meiselas explained that her experience with *Time* in 1978 taught her an important lesson about her own privilege and responsibilities as a photographer and, even more gravely, that "a photograph could kill" ("Some Thoughts" 12).

Frustrations such as this led Meiselas to conclude that her images, though widely circulated, failed to communicate the complexity of their historical moment. Hoping to restore some lost history into her pictures and to regain some control over their circulation and the manner in which they delivered information, she published *Nicaragua*, the photo book, in 1981. The book consists of seventy-one color photographs, each printed on a full page but presented without any textual information. Despite the lack of text, the images do adhere to a general narrative based on the temporal structure of the rebellion, a fact made clear by the book's prefatory page, which lists a sequence of three dates and events: "June 1978 The Somoza Regime," "September 1978 Insurrection," and "June 1979–July 1979 The Final Offensive." Below this brief chronology is the inscription: "Nicaragua. A year of news, as if nothing had happened before, as if the roots were not there, and the victory not earned. This book was made so that we remember." No other text appears until the back of the book, where captions to the images can be found alongside small black-and-white reproductions of them.[11] The back of the book contains other contextual materials as well, such as personal statements, prose and poetry by participants in the revolution, a map, statistics about Nicaragua, and a detailed chronology, which outlines the United States' long involvement in the country's history.

The book's opening section begins not with any header or text but simply with pictures that either show life in Nicaragua under the Somoza regime or depict Somoza's National Guard in training; there are also some photographs that reveal early signs of the rebellion. The seventh image in the book, a picture of Somoza opening a new session of the National Congress in June 1978 (figure 2), is especially striking for how it reveals Somoza's detachment from the citizens he purportedly represents. Meiselas's decision to use color film for her Nicaragua work was unusual at the time—most noncommercial documentarians still used black-and-white film because black-and-white pictures were considered more serious, even more "real."[12] Yet this image, shot in color, is brilliant for how it plays with black and white, not in order to perform "seriousness" but rather to suggest to its viewers a sense of otherness, distance, and erasure. Somoza, his ministers, the National Guard, and every person shown in the image wear white suits, uniforms, and hats; they walk on a white tiled sidewalk or stand on bleached concrete. A black car sits at an angle in the middle of the image and separates the foreground (where Somoza and other government officials stand) from the background (where the National Guard is positioned). Other small black shapes (polished shoes, bow ties,

[11] Meiselas has been criticized for marginalizing the captions this way. But after the book's publication, she explained that financial considerations account for the book's design and presence of the captions in small print in the back.

[12] For more on documentary photography's resistance to color, see Stein.

Figure 2. Susan Meiselas, *President Anastasio Somoza Debayle Opening New Session of the National Congress, June 1978*, 1978. © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

black hair, etc.) are scattered across the surface of the print, but there is no other color, none of the lushness that characterizes so many of Meiselas's other images. This withdrawal of color—as emphasized by Meiselas's framing of the image—mocks the notion of seeing in black and white where all facts are set and all relationships determined and makes us aware of our own viewing, of what is shown and not shown and, even more, of how we see.

Throughout *Nicaragua*, Meiselas includes a number of images, like this one, that seem designed to remind us of the act of looking not only as a kind of witnessing but also as a way of framing the world—or in the terms of this special issue, fusing photography's *worldedness* with its ability to evoke the *worlding* potential of art in the mind of its viewer. The book's fourteenth image—and its most gruesome—depicts legs severed from a body, tossed on the edge of a hillside located outside of Managua. Visible from a highway, this site was well known during Somoza's rule as the place where the National Guard carried out assassinations. In photographing it, Meiselas records not only the Guard's atrocities, but also a link between sight and politics: Who is meant to see these bodies, murdered, degraded and discarded, and for what purpose? Other pictures early on in the book similarly emphasize (albeit in less horrifying ways) the critical role that seeing plays in the formation of one's political identity. In one photograph National Guard recruits watch one of their comrades practice dismantling a US-made M-16 rifle while blindfolded. In another, recruits walk by an official state portrait of Somoza posed as president and

Figure 3. Susan Meiselas, *Recruits Pass by Official State Portrait of Anastasio Somoza Debayle as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces*, 1978. © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

commander in chief of the armed forces (figure 3). Here Somoza's larger-than-life image stares out and looms over the young men as they pass by it in relative anonymity.

As *Nicaragua* progresses, more and more photographs of the rebellion appear, and though no header or text introduces the book's shift to the insurrection section, it is clear by the twenty-third or twenty-fourth image that the popular insurrection has begun.[13] At this point, Meiselas takes us through a series of images of masked rebels preparing for battle: we see young men as they practice throwing contact bombs outside the city of Monimbo; young Sandinistas holding barricade; and *muchachos* awaiting counterattack by the National Guard in Matagalpa (figure 4). The slowness in the picture from Matagalpa is striking, for this is a battle photograph, and yet time seems to have stopped. The masks and weaponry appear at once courageous (these men are willing to sacrifice their lives) and pathetic (their weapons are surely paltry compared to Somoza's Guard)—a contradiction that the middle-distance shot accentuates in the picture's almost excessive humanness. Not close-up enough to glorify the fighters nor far enough away to render them abstract, this picture catches its subjects stilled and in between: they wait in place for the Guard, halted but

[13] In the back of the book, image 24 is captioned, "First Day of the popular insurrection, August, 26, 1978." But prior to the insurrection images, the book shows more and more protest photographs: students taking to the streets, attending funeral processions, and expressing their loyalty to the revolution with increasing boldness. And it is worth noting that at one point in *Pictures from a Revolution*, a former Sandinista discusses how dangerous it was to participate in these funeral processions and yet how important—how significant it was to be seen in the streets with and as Sandinistas.

Figure 4. Susan Meiselas, *Awaiting Counterattack by the Guard in Matagalpa*, 1978. © Susan Meiselas/ Magnum Photos

ready to move; and they watch, looking for movement. This photograph freezes, for just an instant, the time of the Revolution, and thereby paradoxically emphasizes duration in a manner that renders visible the otherwise invisible suffering, oppression, and desperation that motivated the rebellion; it enables and compels the viewer to construct a narrative without text, making the events of the revolution viscerally understandable without resorting to a totalizing, social-scientific "explanation" that closes off further dialogue, engagement, and debate.

But after witnessing the hope of the insurrection, we are presented with its failure. We see the bombing of Estelí, a Sandinista stronghold; we watch the National Guard enter cities in tanks; we observe townspeople taking goods from burned-out stores; we are confronted by an image of a young woman wheeling her dead husband home on a cart in order to bury him—a woman we meet again in *Pictures from a Revolution* (figure 5). We experience a return to oppression in these images, and yet, as we come to the last section, "The Final Offensive," hope of the revolution's success reemerges. Popular forces rally, Sandinista supporters serve food to Sandinista fighters at barricades in Managua, Sandinistas attack the walls of the Estelí National Guard headquarters, and eventually thousands enter the central plaza in Managua to celebrate victory.[14]

[14] Meiselas has said that she sought to create a visual narrative of the revolution for those on both sides who fought in it. However, my description does not include many sympathetic images of the National Guard, because there really are not many. *Pictures from a Revolution* includes more

Figure 5. Susan Meiselas, *Monimbo Woman Carrying Her Dead Husband Home to Be Buried in Their Backyard,* 1979. © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

After its release in 1981, *Nicaragua* received mixed reviews. More recently, critics such as John Berger have praised the book for its ability to "take us right inside a revolutionary moment," and to do so in a manner that refused "all the rhetoric normally associated with such pictures: the rhetoric of violence, revolutionary heroism, and the glorification of misery" ("Susan" 24). But shortly after the time of its publication, other reviewers, most notably, Martha Rosler, were less convinced. Rosler wrote, "[o]nce there was a brutal dictator in a small banana republic in steamy Central America who so abused his people, grabbing most of the wealth, stifling initiative, and causing misery, that waves of discontent spread throughout the entire population until finally peasants, lawyers, housewives, businessmen, and even priests and nuns rose up in outrage. Despite incredible atrocities, they eventually succeeded in driving out the beasts and his minions, and they looked forward to living in peace forever after. It would be easy to garner this fairy-tale impression of the Nicaraguan revolution from photojournalist Susan Meiselas's book *Nicaragua*" (246). Rosler connects Meiselas's style and use of color to "anomic" street photography and to the exoticism of fashion photography. In her estimation, the beauty of

> contra voices, but I think it would be a mistake to present Meiselas's work (the book or the film) as somehow nonpartisan. For instance, in the film, her interaction with one former contra leader, Maurice Moreno, is heartbreakingly painful to watch. Moreno cries, fights back tears, and tries to hide his hand, which was amputated at the end of the contra war. But then Meiselas's voice-over identifies Moreno as the feared contra commander that sent troops to decimate the small remote village of Pantasma.

Meiselas's images obscures "the *systematic* relation between the U.S. policies and exploitation of the Third World" (253).

If Rosler's judgment seems unsparingly severe, it is ultimately not so different from Meiselas's own conclusions. Three years after completing *Nicaragua*, she publicly criticized the book for emphasizing dramatic moments and omitting the more ordinary scenes of daily life:

> *In 1981, I produced a book documenting the popular overthrow of the U.S.-backed Somoza regime in Nicaragua. . . . [T]he book attempted to overcome the sensational quality of fragmentary news reports by placing these events in the context of an evolving political process. Completion of the book left me with many questions about my own process of selection and the extent to which it differed from the use of my photographs in the mass media. In order to engage the reader, I had still emphasized the more dramatic moments and tended to omit the more ordinary scenes of daily life.* (qtd. in Lubben 158)

Meiselas thus criticizes her book for not being sufficiently realist (attentive to the everyday) and for being overly romantic (melodramatic), a position with which I agree: the photo book, when first released in 1981, failed to portray the systematic relation between US policies and Third World exploitation.

Such lingering dissatisfaction eventually animated Meiselas's decision to return to Nicaragua and revisit her images from the revolution. The resulting film project, *Pictures from a Revolution*, features Meiselas driving across Nicaragua, walking through neighborhoods, and searching for the subjects pictured in her earlier work. She carries her *Nicaragua* with her, using it as a guide, showing it to strangers, and asking if they know the people imaged in the pictures. Periodically she successfully locates one of her subjects and proceeds to interview them using the earlier photograph as a way into conversation. All of the people Meiselas meets remember their photographic encounter with her—not only Meiselas herself, but also what they were thinking when the photographs were shot, what their dreams had been for the revolution, details about what they had been wearing, and so on. Some have their own copies of the images (from reproductions in newspapers and revolutionary propaganda), which, carefully stored and wrapped in plastic, they locate, unpack, and share with Meiselas. As all of these various photographs are passed around, handed from one person to the next, looked at, examined, and touched, the film uncouples the spectator (of the film as well as those in the film) from the image. In the process, a productive tension emerges between the beholder and the beheld, establishing both a connection to and distinction from the stilled (photographic) moments of representation. Insofar as these two subject positions, beholder and beheld, are often occupied by the same body in *Pictures from the Revolution*, the film might also be understood as at times dividing the self. But even for those of us not represented in the film, the relationship between the initial photographic encounter, the resulting photograph, and the subject or protagonist's experience of it gives those watching the film the space and time to reflect on just how and why these images got made, how and why they make meaning the way they do, as well as the ethics of Meiselas's and our own looking (Barker 206).

Among the subjects Meiselas interviews are a number of former Sandinistas and Sandinista supporters. But we also meet a former member of the National Guard, who became a contra officer. "It was all for nothing. We killed for nothing. We died for nothing," he mourns. There is an interview with a farmer who fought for the revolution: "My life hasn't changed," he says, "but my life is peaceful, without shocks. I'm no longer afraid of the National Guard." We also hear the voice of a former Sandinista combat soldier—a woman, who now lives with a former contra—who grieves the loss of solidarity, the camaraderie, she felt during the revolution. Whether Meiselas is speaking with someone who is bitter, resigned, or satisfied, these segments are devastating and truly heartbreaking—whether with former contras or Sandinistas. Accurately, I think, a 1991 *New York Times* review of *Pictures from a Revolution* describes the Nicaragua that Meiselas and her collaborators, Richard Rogers and Alfred Guzzetti, see as "exhausted" (Canby). In fact this is an observation expressed by a former Sandinista supporter in one of Meiselas's interviews: "[W]e thought there would be a better life. But no, things have turned out just the same. . . . At that time, we didn't think about what would happen to us ten years later. . . . Many mothers of those who died regret the deaths of their children. They fought so much—to die—and for nothing. For a Nicaragua without a real triumph. A Nicaragua which is exhausted—that's what we have now."

Yet to think of *Pictures from a Revolution* only, or even primarily, as a story of exhausted effort risks confining both the film and the revolution to the realm of personal emotion. The film is emotional (and multiple subjects shed tears as they compare the early days of the insurrection to their current lives), but more significant—and this is key to the film's durational and realist aesthetic—is how the film, in the threshold between still and moving image, enables an extended (that is, durational) gaze that creates simultaneously the space and opportunity for contemplation and historical insight (Zarzycka and Papenburg 164). In this space, individual political identities (ours, Meiselas's, and those of the interviewees) are formed, unsettled, reconstituted, and unsettled again such that viewers come to understand the role that ongoing historical dynamics plays in the formation of those identities. As Kristen Lubben explains, "[i]t is important to see Meiselas's photographs not in art, but in history" (8).

Let me explain further by way of a few examples. The first centers on a conversation in *Pictures from a Revolution* between Meiselas and a man named Justo, the central figure in the photograph that appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1978. Prior to Meiselas's on-screen interaction with Justo, we also learn from Meiselas's voice-over that Justo is a shoemaker by profession and one of the first self-identified Sandinistas she met in 1978. It is because of Justo, she explains, that she came to realize that many people around her were living double lives as revolutionaries, that Justo "was experimenting with contact bombs, that he buried his mask in the dirt in his floor in case the National Guard would come and do a search of his house." What she could see was not necessarily what was happening. Meeting Justo, she says, changed everything about how she looked at Nicaragua. Meiselas's exchange with Justo comes fairly early in the film; from the beginning of their interaction it is clear that he continues to be a strong supporter of the revolution, even as he acknowledges, "It's true we didn't get all we wanted. We didn't

achieve all we wanted. One has to be a realist. I insist, and I'll repeat this to anyone: What we had here was a war of aggression. Here we had an economic blockade, a trade embargo. So many clandestine moves against us! . . . They didn't allow the revolution to expand, to create its own program. . . . They didn't let the revolutionary process go forward." The interview then pauses, and a montage of newspaper clippings flashes across the screen, showing headlines about the contras, embargoes, Ronald Reagan, the Sandinistas' (failed) attempts to rebuild, secret weapons deals, murders, and so on.

The camera scans slowly enough for the headlines to be read but too fast to glean any real detail. Still, this montage seems to reveal something of Justo's political understanding, or at least communicate something of his thoughts, and to transfer those thoughts to us spectators by creating new chains of associations that link emotions and events in our minds in new ways. And then we return to the interview, the camera still and tightly focused on Justo, his face nearly filling the screen—he defends the revolution and insists that his friends that died did so for a cause. Meiselas asks, "Then you can't accept that they died for nothing?" Taken aback, Justo responds: "No. That blood is precious. That blood was for a cause. It's the cause of the poor, the cause of the oppressed. I can't betray this, Susan, nor can I forget."

Through this interaction, Meiselas's earlier photograph of Justo, the one from 1978, transforms; it no longer functions as a news shot and turns into something more like a portrait—not a traditional portrait, but rather one that situates its subject in a network of social relations, including those that govern representation. And as part of this transformation, film and photograph no longer exist as two different media (one static, one moving) but as a single process, a social machine that operates over time. Though Justo is not finally represented or dignified or properly understood by the moving image, he is, through the joining together of photograph and film, socialized in the mind of the viewer, understood as a political subject (Schwartz 30).[15]

The second example comes roughly halfway through the film: this scene begins with Meiselas and her colleagues driving along a dirt road, the camera aimed out the window at the Nicaraguan landscape passing by. Soon they arrive at a small house in the country. Across the screen flashes a still photograph from *Nicaragua*: the image of a young woman in a red dress pushing a dead body wrapped in burlap on a cart. The object is identifiable as a body by its shoes, which poke out from the otherwise indiscernible mass (figure 5). The camera zooms out, and we see the woman in the photograph as she is in the present of the film, holding a copy of Meiselas's book, as well as an older woman, perhaps the woman's mother, who holds one edge of the book while a boy, perhaps her son, watches the interaction. The

[15] My understanding of how Meiselas's still and moving images operate as a social machine are indebted to Schwartz's groundbreaking reading of Paul Strand's film *The Wave*, in which his slowed camera functions to introduce still images into the moving film. The connection between Strand and Meiselas falls outside the purview of this article but deserves more attention. How might a study of Strand in relation to Meiselas further develop the idea of durational aesthetics but also create a kind of durational art historical methodology (particularly given the work the collective Group Material produced in the 1980s that chronicled US intervention in Central America and included images by Strand and Meiselas)?

camera, as in other meetings between Meiselas and her earlier photographed subjects, is for a brief second at a near standstill as the woman looks at the picture of herself from ten years prior. The camera waits, the figures wait, everything (except the wind) seems momentarily suspended. Stillness extends into silence as Meiselas (and collaborators Rogers and Guzzetti) lets the camera linger on its subject, and the self-consciousness with which the camera does so makes us aware of how we see: looking—beholding—is denaturalized, understood as helping to produce, not simply reflect, society's structuring.[16] Finally, Meiselas asks, "And what happened that day? Do you remember?" The question snaps the woman out of her reverie: "You took this photo of me, right?" she says. "I told you his name, everything about him that day that he died, yes." She continues, "That day, all by myself I buried him. One man helped me." "How old were you?" Meiselas asks. "About fourteen."

The scene is not relaxed; the woman remembers her frustration and the anger and fear she felt the day the photograph was taken. There is an awkward exchange of glances: the camera's, Meiselas's, the subject's (both in the moving and still images), and ours. The tenor of the conversation changes, however, after the woman looks down again at the photograph, notices the shoes her husband wore, and declares, "Look at the shoe there. New! Brand new!" She turns to show her family: "Worn for the first time that day! New." The longer she looks at the photograph, the more it affects her, *moves* her; she touches her face pensively, continues to look at the photograph, and then grabs her earring, realizing she wears the same ones as in the photograph. Throughout *Pictures from a Revolution*, still images disrupt the film's flow, momentarily halting time and encouraging spectators to evaluate historical conditions and social relations, but here the interruption of the narrative's momentum takes the form of what Jennifer Barker in a different context calls "an irruption of touch in the visual image" (201). The materiality of the image as it is experienced by the subjects represented in the film, on top of the image of tactility as it is witnessed by spectators of the film, produces a paradox—an uncanny coexistence of material presence and temporal distance that works to visually emphasize duration (Barker 203).[17] The scene concludes with Meiselas taking a polaroid of the woman posing with one of her daughters. After she snaps the photograph, she hands it to the woman, who holds it as other children come to watch the image develop, performing again, albeit on a much smaller scale, the visualization of duration and slow formation or coming into focus of historical subjects.

The relationship between the tactile and the visual thus plays as important a role in the construction of durational aesthetics here, as does that between the still and the moving image, and it is visibly emphasized in *Pictures from a Revolution* in multiple ways: in how subjects respond to and physically interact with the photographs they confront of their younger selves; in the way Meiselas marks up and carries a copy of *Nicaragua* around with her; and in the number of people who have

[16] For more on seeing as an active agent, see Rancière.

[17] Barker's concern is how this simultaneous visual and tactile experience creates a being-with that expresses an ethical relationship with others in that it allows bodies to come in contact with one another and yet recognize the other as undeniably present and distinct from oneself. I think this insight also applies to representation in *Pictures from a Revolution*.

saved, stored, and cherished all kinds of photographs and reproductions from the time of the revolution, which they share with Meiselas—in sometimes precious and other times straightforward ways—a decade later. We see in the film, for instance, a copy of Meiselas's photograph of a man named Augusto fighting during the final offensive that was reproduced in a 1981 edition of *Barricada*, the official paper of the FSLN. "That's my father," Augusto's oldest daughter proudly proclaims as Meiselas holds the paper in her hands. Or we learn that in the city of Estelí, a Sandinista stronghold, a reenactment of the final offensive is staged every year based at least in part on Meiselas's photographs.[18] And there are other, countless occasions where photographs (Meiselas's and others) are passed around, pointed at, handled, or turned over in search of an inscription or information or simply to be touched.

Through these gestures, movement becomes the product of stillness and tactility—not the literal movement of the protagonists of the film but movement in the viewers, who are moved to understand their political selves and political communities differently. Similarly, in the film, groups of people gather around photographs, remember the insurrection, tell stories, and touch images. In this, still photographic instants extend into cinematic, durational time (Barker 204–5). And these durationally extended expressions of human exchange (whether represented on film or experienced by viewers) actualize media—the film, the photograph, the still and moving image—not as containers or calcified or fixed images but as a social process that makes solidarity possible.

Representation and Political Action

There is a paradox in trying to construct an idea of durational aesthetics to talk about something that, by most measures, did not last and was in many ways a failure. The Sandinistas were voted out in 1990 (in 2006 they were voted back in power, though amid scandal and corruption), and *Pictures from a Revolution* only further illustrates the revolution's failings—its inability to effect change in any substantial way in the lives of those who fought so hard for it. Through Meiselas's project, we seem to witness the collapse (rather than emergence) of a revolutionary alternative, whether in the form of a state socialist society or even just an attempt to reject US regional hegemony. In either case, it all just seems to end. And so, on the level of world history, the Nicaraguan Revolution has come to signal the end of one kind of politics (that is, a classical Leninist revolutionary tradition) and to mark the beginning of political changes in the United States that culminated in global neoliberalism (led by figures such as Reagan and Margaret Thatcher) and the rise of new social movements (such as ACT-UP and AIDS activism, environmentalism, and the antiglobalization movements of the 1990s).[19]

But the rhetoric of "failure," which is closely linked to the often-posited eclipse of utopian possibilities in our time, functions not only to close off the narrative of

[18] The Estelí town museum houses a number Meiselas's photographs of the revolution.

[19] Another relevant question with regard to realism and durational aesthetics might be then: what does a postsocialist realism look like?

the Nicaraguan Revolution but also to reduce its experience to a totalized, social scientific summary. The notion that utopian thinking is closed to us, with potentially negative consequences for our future, is in part an effect of imposing this particular closure. But in Meiselas's representation, potentiality exceeds any narrative of short-term failure or indeed any narrative at all. In Meiselas's Nicaraguan work, the description of an experienced scene is not confined to the transmission of historical information, because the play of still and moving images enables spectators, and even photographic subjects themselves, to interact again and again with the photographs and, through this process, with a past set of historical relationships; Meiselas's images are used as a resource in the future. There may be unfinished business, but in the long durée of the event, the revolution remains an inspirational and positive step toward the realization of justice and equality. The possibilities live on, as explained in *Nicaragua* in the words of Chamorro: "History doesn't come to an end, / with the ringing of bells by the grave, / or with the rumbling of tanks / against a peaceful city. / History begins when it is firmly established / that an ideal lives in a people, / though men die" (9).[20]

It is no wonder, then, the objects and images that continue to feel most alive—or at least animate through time—are Meiselas's photographs from 1978–79. These still images continue to ask questions about the relations between historic event, photographic encounter, and the spectators' experience of looking. They have the power to move us and challenge us not only by narrating the enduring conditions of poverty and oppression that led to the emergence of an armed resistance but also by presenting those past events in present space.[21] In *Reframing History*, another iteration of her work on this topic, Meiselas returns to Nicaragua on the occasion of the revolution's twenty-fifth anniversary and, in collaboration with local cultural organizations, installs nineteen mural-sized reproductions of her 1978–79 photographs on public walls and in open spaces at or close to the sites where they were originally taken. On a billboard in Matagalpa, for example, she installs a reproduction of her photograph of young rebels awaiting counterattack by Somoza's guard during the insurrection (figure 4); or in Masaya, in a public courtyard, she hangs a copy of her image *Returning Home*, which depicts a woman staring straight out at the camera amid the rubble of a building destroyed by the National Guard's extensive aerial bombardment of the city in their attempt to regain control. Meiselas's 2004 installation inserts this image into its old space, now rebuilt, such that the 1978 ruins occupy (temporarily) the new manicured space. One photograph that documents the installation (figure 6) depicts three boys engaging each other about the picture. The shot is extraordinary for how the boys mirror the three bodies represented in the earlier image: in both, a figure dressed in red and tan

[20] In this regard, one might also think of a revolutionary movement such as that launched by the Zapatistas as a continuation of the work begun by the Nicaraguan Revolution. But also important to think about is the long durée of colonialism, which goes back centuries and is referenced by the Sandinistas when they use traditional Indian masks of Monimbo to disguise their identity in the fight against Somoza's neocolonialism, as in figure 1.

[21] For past events in present time, see Bellour. For more about the storytelling aspect of the Nicaragua project, see Breckenridge.

Figure 6. Installation view, Susan Meiselas, *Reframing History*, 2004. © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

stands in the center flanked by another on each side. One of the boys in the installation photograph points to the 1978 picture, a gesture that seems physically to connect them to the image, as well as its history; this is their past.

Here we see the haptic texture of human social exchange, speaking and listening, as crucial to the mechanics of collective identity. Spoken language—animated, stilled, reanimated—becomes part of the very structure, part of the medium (like the photographic medium itself) of Meiselas's installation, and it is never consigned to logocentric or essential fixity (Kester 29–30). This is important for situating durational aesthetics' narrativizing emphasis on collaborative exchange in a contemporary moment that so often favors perpetual shock. As Grant Kester explains, "Unfortunately, current theoretical paradigms, especially those informed by the poststructuralist tradition, harbor a deep suspicion of labor and durational experience. Jean-Luc Nancy's writing on community is emblematic in this regard. Community, for Nancy, can only be ethically constructed if it arises in an instant, a moment of 'unworked' epiphany. As soon as the experience of community involves a durationally extended process of social and discursive exchange it descends into mythic essentialism" (29). Meiselas's work made in and about Nicaragua shows how knowledge produced through durational, collective interaction need not be either a priori totalizing or politically abject. The installation photograph narrativizes a working community: these three boys stand together and discuss the photograph but

not as a homogenous whole; their bodily gestures—one points, one leans, one places his hands on his hips—separate them as singular beings, each occupying his own space, even as they join together in the labor of looking at their collective past.[22]

According to Marta Zarzycka and Bettina Papenburg, "[b]oth moving and still images have the power to *move* us but also to *still* us with their capacity to invite a state of contemplation and arrest—particularly infrequent in current times that value movement as a sign of activity, vitality, and advancement" (164). Meiselas's Nicaraguan work moves and stills viewers in just this sort of way, and it reveals the political valence of extended moments of connection to building a sense of history that allows social relations to make sense—to become, in a word, narratable. Together, *Nicaragua*, *Pictures from a Revolution*, and *Reframing History* stretch the revolution's duration and, in so doing, generate a visual and political space that is neither final nor fixed, a space Barker might describe as "unexpected," that is, a space that creates opportunities to think about the ethical relationship between viewer and viewed and, I would add, history (194). Meiselas's experimentation with multiple forms of representation absolutely recognizes realism's fundamental fidelity to the social embeddedness, the narrative possibility, and, thus, the historicity of the image. But, as multiple viewpoints overlap in her work, as they converge and meet in complex and imaginative ways, they also reveal previously unperceivable pasts and reinvented historical narratives.

Durational aesthetics, then, offers a realist method of artistic making that models a form of seeing and action that does not privilege (or even call for) endless spontaneity or continuous disruption as the signpost of radicality—either politically or epistemologically. Durational realism captures the ongoing encounter of the photographer (in this instance, Meiselas), the subjects whom she has pictured (here, the Nicaraguan citizens who participated in and lived through the Sandinista Revolution), and the spectators who respond—a collective labor that, in being narratable, functions as an entrance, not a barrier, to the political sphere. And so in 1990, when Susan Meiselas picked up a moving camera to carry alongside her still one, it was not to abandon the single image or still photograph but rather to consider and utilize its limits in order to return (and return again) to the past so as to create a possibility for another future.[23]

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[22] One could think here as well about different kinds of testimonies piling up on top of each other such that none dominates; there is no convergence of vision, no formulation of a single truth. There is instead an accumulation that renders closure impossible.

[23] See Ross.

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