

# Analyzing Visual Rhetoric: The Photo As Argument

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*“Photographs alter and enlarge our notion of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more important, an ethics of seeing.”*

*“A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.”*

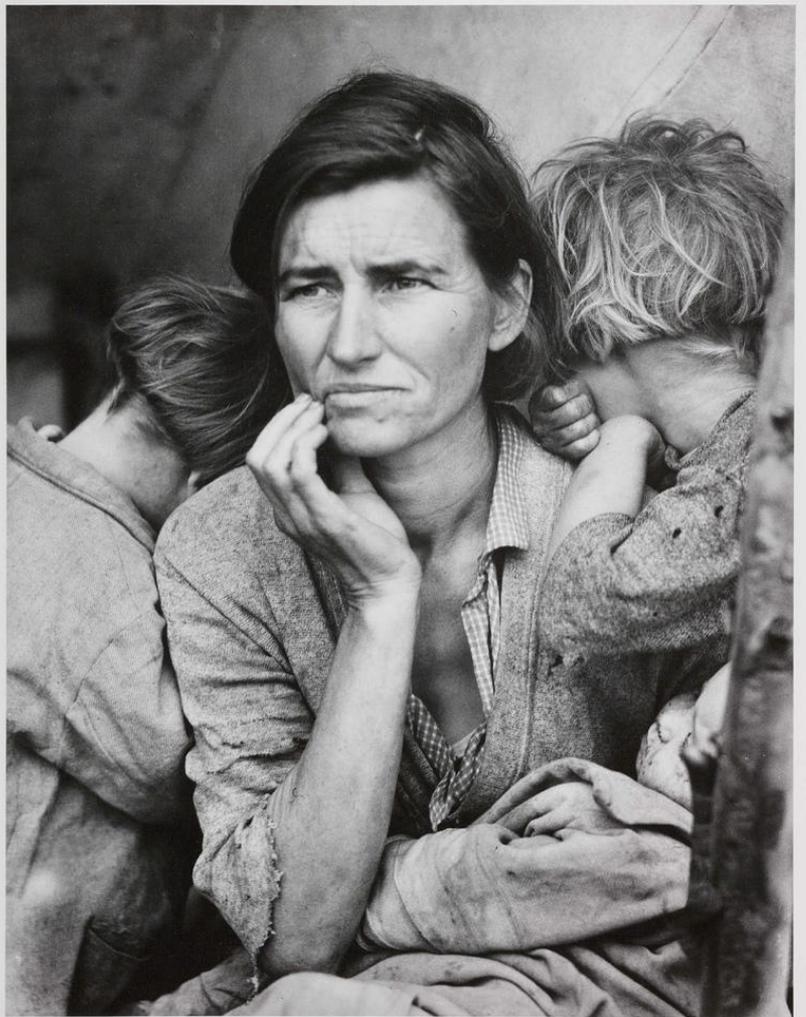
*Susan Sontag*

# “Migrant Mother”

Dorothea Lange

1936

**Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children.  
Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California**



# The Power of Visual Images: Impact or Exploit?

## Reading a visual text: First impression questions

1. What is the subject? What claim does the photo (and its title) make about the topic? Does it tell a story? What is it?
2. What emotions do the text evoke? What visual elements evoke those emotions? Are there visual allusions that might evoke emotion or memory?
3. What is the occasion? Where did the text first appear?
4. Who is the audience? Who saw the text when it first appeared? Who is looking at it now?
5. Who is the speaker? What political or organizational ties does the speaker have?
6. What is the purpose? Is there more than one purpose? Does the text make a claim about the purpose or issues it portrays?

# How does Migrant Mother make an argument?

First, the basics:

1. The speaker, Dorothea Lange, is a documentarian of the Great Depression
2. The subject is a crop failure. The family here had to sell their tent to be able to afford food.
3. The subject is a woman who looks older than her 32 years, whose poverty shows in the clothing she and her children wear, as well as in her exhausted and distracted expression.

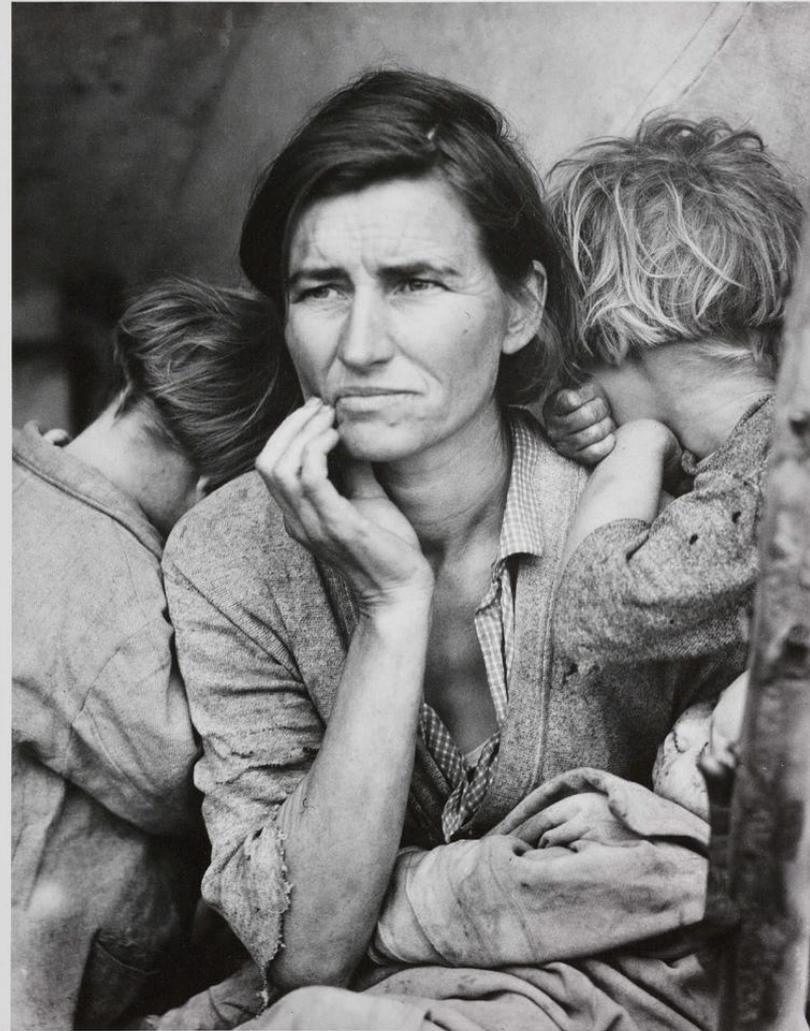
# Let's take a closer look

Though the photo is black and white, what do the values (light to dark) say?

What do you notice about line? What directions do they go?

What geometrical shapes do you notice? Where and how are they repeated?

What is the picture plane? That is, where are the subjects located? Does that location tell you anything?



# How do the visual elements create the argument made by Migrant Mother?

What does the tightness of the frame suggest?

What do the upward lines tell us?

How is the mother's hardship portrayed? How is her strength highlighted?

What is suggested by the loose triangular shape of the composition?

Interpretations?

Exploitation or impact?

# Photo as Autonomous Text: What Do You See?

Write a caption for  
the photo ...



# The Back Story....

- The photo was taken at Manzanar Relocation Center in 1943 where over 10,000 Japanese were evacuated through Executive Order 9066 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.
- Ansel Adams, known for his panoramic images of nature, was invited by his friend Ralph Merritt, the camp director, to take photographs.
- Adams was given a fairly free rein, but he was not allowed to photograph the guard towers; some of his photos, however, are taken from a tower.
- His collection *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans* included 50 photos plus text by Adams.

# Now What Do You See?

First impression questions

What is the subject? What claim does the photo (and its title) make about the topic? Does it tell a story? What is it?

What emotions do the text evoke? What visual elements evoke those emotions? Are there visual allusions that might evoke emotion or memory?

What is the occasion? Where did the text first appear?

Who is the audience? Who saw the text when it first appeared? Who is looking at it now?

Who is the speaker? What political or organizational ties does the speaker have?

What is the purpose? Is there more than one purpose? Does the text make a claim about the purpose or issues it portrays?



# Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange

- Dorothea Lange hired by the U.S. government to make a photographic record of the “evacuation” and “relocation” of Japanese-Americans in 1942.
- Military “impounded” her photos because it did not reflect what the administration wanted the public to see.
- The work was not made public for half a century.
- [Review in New York Times, November 6, 2006](#)

