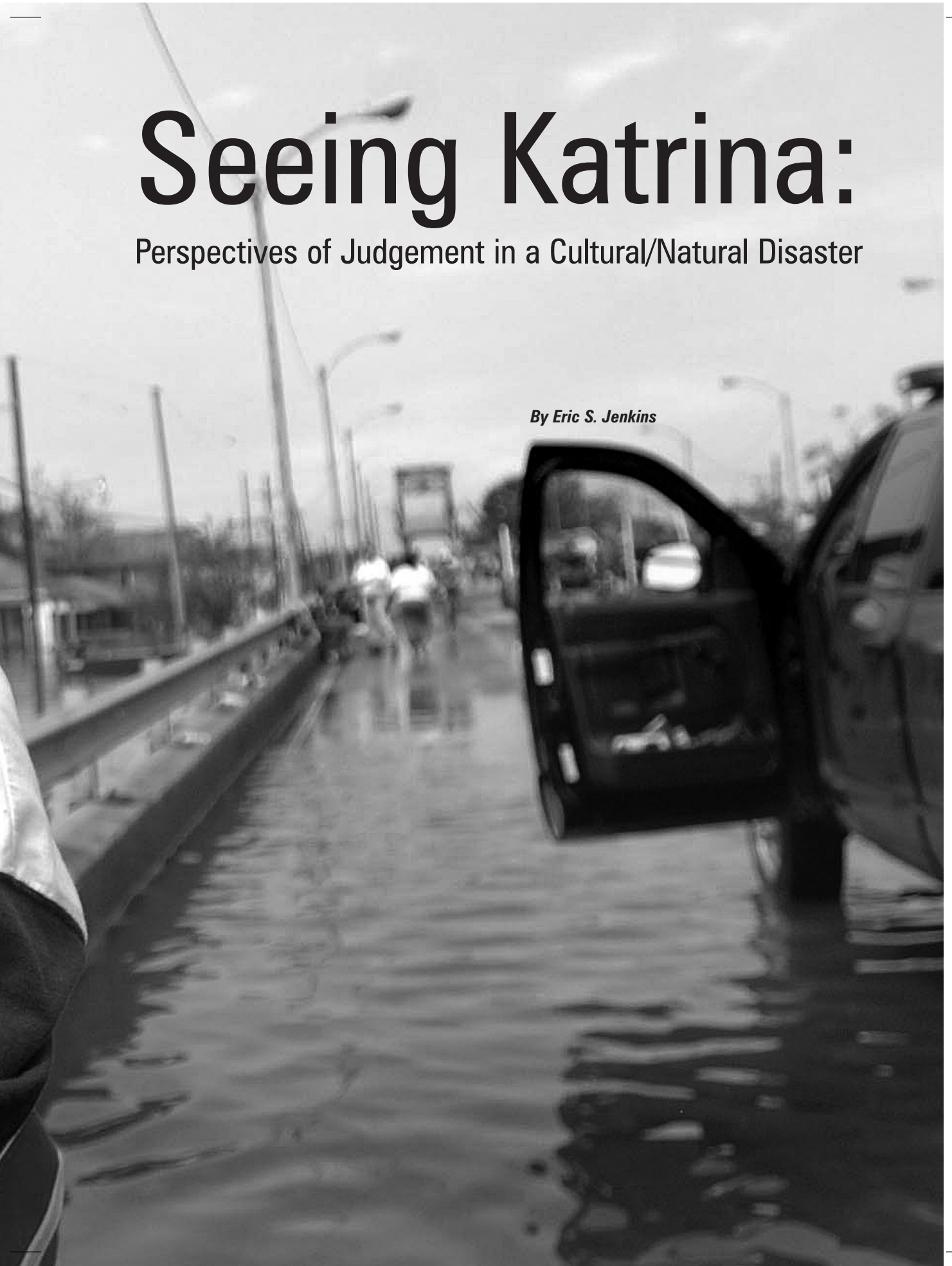


Seeing Katrina:

Perspectives of Judgement in a Cultural/Natural Disaster

By Eric S. Jenkins



This article examines a series of photographs from The Washington Post covering Hurricane Katrina. I argue that the modes of seeing in the images structure the possible meanings of the event. These images represent the documentary mode which, in pursuit of "objectivity," positions the viewer in a stance of detachment and judgment. In the rush to judge, familiar identifications of left/right, culture/nature, and public/private, surface as the primary grounds for evaluation. In the photographs, the urban characteristics of the scene direct the viewers' identification. The various judgments diverge based on how the viewer identifies with this urban scene. In short, I argue that how we saw Katrina influences how the disaster was interpreted. The stale interpretations, from cultural to natural, are both equally structured into the photographs. Producing different evaluations, from anti-globalization to the anti-racist, requires interrogation of the dominant news-media mode and the imaging of new points of view.

Never before has the divide between nature and culture so deliquesced as on August 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina flood waters disintegrated the levees protecting New Orleans. As the thin veneer of civilization ripped away, a desperate populace, primarily poor and African-American, remained as emblems of and witnesses to the failures and fissures in modernity's utopian promises. Most public commentators, however, avoided condemnation of the development project, the racist colonial history, or a capitalist ecological hubris. Instead, blame rested primarily on two familiar counterparts—nature or culture. Some preferred to depict Katrina as a natural disaster, a tragic yet unavoidable act of a fickle earth. Others relied on the cultural explanation, blaming the incompetence and insensitivity of political actors ranging from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to the mayor of New Orleans to George W. Bush. The explanation unquestionably deserves more complexity than the typical media treatment; however, the media's vivid images surely structure the contours of popular judgments and perceptions. Images of down-trodden African-Americans, struggling against an uncontrollable nature, underwrite both the natural and cultural versions. Just as some expect to see indigenous peoples inhabiting the "wild," expecta-

tions were reinforced when African-American bodies dotted the "natural" disaster. Similarly, just as we might anticipate insidious politicians pulling hidden levers, presuppositions were bolstered when bungling bureaucrats magnified the "cultural" tragedy.

These are familiar explanations, and the familiar politics of left/right, black/white, and public/private quickly emerged to filter the meanings of the disaster everyone witnessed. The question is: How can so many people see similar images and end up with such different evaluations? Why does the response to Katrina seem trapped into replicating the same tired reasons and politics? Some, such as an early Barthes (1977), might explain the varied interpretations of the images as the result of the anchorage and relay effects of the discursive frame. People interpret the images in these ways because the words direct us to these reads and divert us from others. Obviously, the discursive frames played a role, evidenced by the controversy over captions describing African-American victims "looting" and Anglo victims "finding food." However, is there also something in the images that contributes to these evaluations? Marco Abel (2003) concludes that, indeed, the modes of seeing influence the possible meanings of events. I agree, and, following Abel, I

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have examined numerous photographs of the hurricane Katrina disaster in search of the modes of seeing inscribed therein. I conclude that the images operate according to a documentary mode of seeing that places the viewer in a position of judgment and encourages them to fall back on familiar, and stereotypical, evaluations.

To illustrate this proposition, I examine 165 photographs featured by *The Washington Post* (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/photo/special/7/>).¹ The images include most of the photographs widely featured and distributed in national newspapers and magazines. The number of photographs does not come close to constituting a complete sample of the coverage, but I do believe the galleries are a representative example. Furthermore, the images obviously do not account for the television coverage of the event, but many of the documentary techniques described in this article are frequently used in television as well. I do not argue that these images alone are entirely accountable for the various explanations of Katrina. However, I do conclude that images played a role irreducible to their discursive framing, as shown by their modes of seeing.

To articulate this argument, I proceed in three sections. In the first section, I define modes of seeing as the points of view constructed between viewer and image-objects. I then describe the dominant news-media mode—the documentary mode. I illustrate through these Katrina photographs that this mode places the viewer above, outside, and detached from the scene, ascribing a position of judgment. This mode demands judgment from the detached observer, yet it does not explain why Katrina inspired such divergent evaluations. Therefore, in the second section, I examine the process of judgment in more detail. Following Michel Foucault, I argue that judgment depends on the discrimination of identity and difference. I then look in the Katrina photos for various possibilities of identification, which rest primarily in the features of the urban scene. The split between identity and difference maps onto a split between the urban and suburban in the Katrina photographs. Depending on viewer identification, the possibilities of a cultural or natural judgment simultaneously exist within the seen scene.

In the third section, I use this analysis to draw some conclusions for the continued study of visual rhetoric. My analysis demonstrates the need to focus as much on how images are produced as on what they depict. Furthermore, the conservative and hierarchical implications of the documentary mode suggest the desperate need for alternative modes of seeing in news presentation. I discuss some alternative Katrina photographs, contrasted against the documentary mode. These images point to some alternative possibilities for photojournalism, based on new modes of seeing. The divisive and stale responses to the horrific and potentially eye-opening Katrina tragedy should amply presage the perils of continuing with status-quo modes.

Judgment in the Documentary Mode

Abel's (2003) work, based on an exceptional account of Don DeLillo's 9/11 essay "In the Ruins of the Future,"² motivates my analysis of these Katrina images. Abel, supported by the cinema theories of André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze, concludes that the appearance of an event, by reproducing various modes of seeing, structures its possible meanings. In other words, "what an event means is always already shot through with how it appears" (Abel, 2003, p. 1236). What does Abel mean by "modes of seeing"? Primarily, modes of seeing are points of view or perspectives. Points of view "inhere in events" because they are "relations of force" between the subject (viewer) and object (image). Subjects and objects, then, are the effects of a mutual interaction, emerging from the particular point of view and related primarily through the flavor of the encounter such as direction, distance, and angle—in short, style (Abel, 2003, p. 1237). By introducing a point of view, representations manufacture the possible stances taken towards the content (Barthes' *studium*), structuring the possible rhetorical ripostes (Barthes, 1981). So, in short, Abel theorizes that the point of view from which an event is seen influences the meanings ascribed to the event. For Abel, DeLillo's portrayal of 9/11 is exemplary due to its contrast with the dominant modern perspective typically brought to bear on events.



< *The body of a victim of Hurricane Katrina floats in fetid floodwaters in New Orleans. Tens of thousands of survivors still need to be evacuated from disaster zones in Louisiana.* © James Nielsen—AFP. *Original in color.*

For much of Western visual thought, the viewer is seen as “the locus for and horizon of perception” (Abel, 2003, p. 1238). The conceiving subject stands outside the event, capturing its objective essence. Such beliefs can be traced back to the invention of linear perspective. Beginning in the Renaissance, linear perspective dominated Western art. Linear perspective emulates three-dimensional space by constructing parallel lines running into the image and merging at a common vanishing point. This approach gives the illusion of depth and centers the perspective at a single point outside. The viewer looks into the image as in the infamous metaphor of Alberti’s window (Jay, 1993, pp. 51–60). News photography, although not exactly a linear perspective, also constructs a window on the world, placing the viewer outside of the image. The demand for objectivity necessitates erasure of subjectivity, whether of the photographer or the spectator. Photojournalism inculcates a specific, if often unrecognized, mode of seeing.

Cara Finnegan (2001a) labels this mode of seeing the “documentary mode,” which draws upon “natural materials,” “living scenes,” and “actual facts” (p. 60). In her work on depression-era photography, Finnegan (2001b) illustrates the potent rhetorical force accompanying this mode of seeing. “Because we perceive photographs as fundamentally ‘realistic,’ we make assumptions about their argumentative potential. I call this process the ‘naturalistic enthymeme’: we assume photographs to be ‘true’ or ‘real’ until we are given reason to doubt them” (Finnegan, 2001b, p. 135). Multiple scholars note this naturalizing power of the photograph. Susan Sontag (1977) claims, “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (p. 5). Because the photo derives from the reflections of light off the referent, viewers often ascribe to photographs a higher truth value. Barthes (1981) contends that this is precisely the “noeme” of photography, the “that-has-been” message always conveyed about the image-objects (p. 80). Barthes (1977) sees danger in the



photographic consciousness of its “having-been-there” because it naturalizes myths (p. 44). These beliefs are, of course, cultural assumptions rather than ontological realities, especially given digital photography and editing software. Yet, it is these cultural modes of seeing that supply images with their disarming power, leading Hariman and Lucaites (2003) to call such beliefs “the natural attitude of ideology” (p. 37).

The documentary mode is evident throughout news media coverage, particularly the Katrina images in this article. Yet, the problem posed by the Katrina images is not the naturalization of ideology. Indeed, the divergent responses to and evaluations of the disaster, from cultural to natural, suggest an ideological divide. All of the images follow the tenants of photorealism, marked by the highest cultural standards of modality, or “the truth value or credibility of ... statements about the world” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 160). Thus, we can assume almost everyone believes the photos represent real

events. The ethical and political issues arise from the perspective or point-of-view embodied in the photos. The images place the viewer in a position that is distant, above, outside, and uninvolved with the image objects. This placement occurs through the framing and angles of the photographs. I isolate four primary views that I label the virtual view, the aerial view, the ground-level view, and the face-to-face view. I will describe each view, and the meanings that, in turn inhere in these perspectives.

The virtual view, projected via satellite, occurs from a great distance, from high above, and at such a wide angle as to efface all human presence. These images, although infrared or thermal, represent the first entry of Katrina into public sight. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) describe these images as objective rather than subjective, deriving “from the fact that it does not stop at appearances, but probes beyond the surface, to deeper, more hidden levels” (p. 150). They contend that in objective images the question of involvement and

detachment is not yet broached. However, the satellite images do imply a modicum of involvement for those who live on the Gulf Coast and detachment for those who reside elsewhere. Satellite images warn people of impending danger, requiring the viewer to interpret the objective image as a very real threat. This view from high above and at a great distance constructs a stance of judgment, with the viewer determining the best course of action to take to protect themselves. While satellite images are a valuable tool, the usefulness remains confined to people with the resources to escape.

The aerial view occurs from above, framed by either long shots (human figures occupy about half frame height) or very long shots (anything larger). The aerial view marks the first entry of the hurricane's devastation in public consciousness. They follow two general themes. The first theme portrays natural devastation such as massive waves, submerged houses, or breached levees, as in the Pool photographs. The second theme involves human presence grappling with the natural disaster. Human bodies pock the images, but not in the central line of sight. Instead, smaller figures, mostly African-American and frequently a crowded mass, struggle against the overwhelming natural calamity. The Nielsen image features a woman toiling to feed her dog while bodies, the flood waters, and the errant trash accumulate. Since this image only includes two bodies, it is not exactly representative. However, the Nielsen photograph was widely distributed and on many front pages, so I chose to display it here. Most of the aerial images include a larger number of people and even less human detail. This perspective shows few human features such as facial expression, instead focusing on masses suffering against a cruel surrounding. Even here, the view predominantly effaces personal and cultural detail.

Photographic frames (or shots) portray distance in ways that map into communication studies of proxemics. Proxemics signifies the study of space as a nonverbal means of communication. Such long shots transmit a stance of public distance, or "the distance between people who are and are to remain strangers" (Hall, quoted in Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 131). Public distance constructs

a relationship between viewer and image that suggests disconnection and unfamiliarity. Furthermore, the high angle conveys a relationship of power between viewer and victim. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) conclude, "If a represented participant is seen from a high angle, then the relation between the interactive participants...and the represented participants is depicted as one in which the interactive participant has power over the represented participant" (p. 146). This point of view establishes a relationship of power over distant strangers.

Michel de Certeau (1984) makes a similar point, fittingly through the example of peering down on the city from atop the World Trade Center. For de Certeau, this is the view of the voyeur god, a perspective that creates a fictional knowledge responsible for totalizing human texts and misunderstanding practices. "The voyeur god created by this fiction...must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93). Perhaps the alienation of the voyeur god explains why reporters from CNN, Fox News, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today* all uttered the "Third World" comparison with Katrina (Brooks, 2005). The view is from above, from a safe distance, and at such a wide angle as to erase many human features, including most national or cultural markers. These images are frequently indiscernible from the pictures of devastation such as the recent tsunami.³ This view from above, at a safe distance, blurs the complexities and complications found at the ground level.

De Certeau prefers the perspective from the ground, valorizing walking through the city as a resistant challenge to the fixation imposed by the perspective of the voyeur god. When the photojournalists began walking the streets of New Orleans, however, their images continued to construct a judgmental point of view, fixing the victims and the scene in ways not necessarily resistant or transgressive. The ground level perspective features images mostly framed by the medium-long (showing full human figures) or medium shot (cut off at the knees). While the images show the scene at eye level, conveying a sense of equality, they frequently are staged horizontally at an oblique angle. In oblique angles, the photographer does not align the viewer frontally

with the represented, but instead observes them from the side at an angle. In the Gay photograph, the SWAT team is portrayed frontally while the surrounding victims are portrayed obliquely. The victims are literally on the sidelines. Once again, the point of view constructs a relationship of social distance, rather than personal or intimate distance. Social distance is the space maintained in public interaction with strangers (such as cashiers in a store) or acquaintances (such as business associates). This implies a relationship of minimal attachment. The oblique angle further serves to separate the viewer and referent by conveying a sense of watching from the outside. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) summarize the implications, "The oblique angle says 'what you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with'" (p. 143). In the Gay photograph, then, the SWAT team is staged frontally, as part of the viewer's world, while the victims are staged obliquely, as outsiders. Of course, the obliqueness of an angle is measured in degrees, and a few of the Katrina photographs take a frontal perspective. Yet, the overwhelming number take an oblique angle, and, as we shall see in the face-to-face photographs, even those with a frontal view generally suggest the dispassionate detachment of a voyeuristic perspective.

Finally, as the aftermath continued to unfold, photojournalists became able to directly engage the victims through face-to-face photographs. These images frame the victims according to the medium-close or close shot, allowing the detailed portrayal of human features and expressions. Once again, these images usually occur from the eye-level, suggesting equality in power differences. Furthermore, many of these images take a frontal view, suggesting attachment between viewer and image. However, one final element of perspective noted by Kress and van Leeuwen requires attention as it relates to the documentary mode of seeing in photojournalism. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) distinguish between "offer" and "demand" pictures (pp. 122–124). In demand pictures, the represented participants connect with the viewer via vectors formed by their eyes or gestures. In other words, the represented look or motion out of the image towards the viewer, establishing an imaginary contact. Demand pictures began with the techniques

of portraiture, and, importantly, the demand subjectifies the represented participants. They call out to the viewer, embracing them in a mutual gaze, and thereby forming a bond. In contrast, the offer image objectifies those represented. The represented do not directly address the viewer; instead, they remain involved in the surrounding scene. The viewer becomes an "invisible onlooker ... it 'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 124).

Obviously, it is the demand for objective information that creates the impetus for journalists to rely primarily on "offer" pictures. However, it is still astonishing that almost every Katrina image investigated here, whether from a frontal or oblique angle, from the medium-long to the close shot, represents the victims as objects of the viewer's contemplation. Thus, even in the face-to-face images which likely inspired the most sympathetic response, a stance of hierarchy and detachment is maintained. While we can recognize these victims in their cultural and human detail, we still see them from an objectifying point of view. Contrary to both Finnegan and Sontag, who see a democratizing influence in photography, photo-realism in the documentary mode appears, in this example, to import a hierarchical and authoritative stance.⁴

To summarize, the four primary views of Katrina maintain a perspective of distance, power, detachment, and externality that seem inherent in the documentary mode of seeing. These characteristics position the viewer in the stance of judge. For Abel (2003), this stance leads to "what Foucault and Deleuze dub the indignity of speaking for others" (p. 1241). The danger is that speaking for others often results in the erasure of difference and otherness through the mistaken and disguised insertion of interested self-perspective into the discussion. With the Katrina recovery effort including fat checks to mega-corporations and excluding displaced residents from the reconstruction (Davis, 2005), Abel's conclusion appears powerfully adept.

As an alternative, DeLillo's work provides a new mode of response-ability, avoiding the pitfalls of speaking for others by refusing to assign meaning

and saddle the event with judgment. Judgment brings a perspective from the outside, from the no-place of the cogito. DeLillo, instead, foregrounds the “event’s how,” weaving a story that continually shifts narrative perspective (Abel, 2003, p. 1237). Suspending judgment is not moral relativism or the elimination of agency, but an active stance portraying the world from the perspective of the event rather than the subject. DeLillo, after all, writes a compelling account. Instead, “DeLillo’s reconfiguration of response as aesthetic stance—as response-ability—suggests that response is about a mood, a rhythm, or a capacity to give oneself to the primacy of the event” (Abel, 2003, p. 1237).

Seeing all the stale binaries of Western culture deployed in response to Katrina poignantly adduces Abel’s argument. The “false” essentialisms of suburban/urban, black/white, nature/culture, and public/private somehow show up in the “true” images of the tragedy. How could such a singular disaster replicate all the familiar patterns? Why does the response to Katrina seem trapped into replicating the same tired reasons? Neither of the primary explanations (one seeing the disaster as natural and unavoidable and the other blaming racist politicians) focuses much attention on the deeper causes such as poverty, segregation, “white flight,” flaws in the built environment, ecological devastation to wetlands, overdevelopment of the river basin, global warming, or the prioritization of funding for the military-industrial complex over basic infrastructural needs. Can it be that speaking for others guarantees such simplistic evaluations? What, then, do we do in the midst of a disaster, when so few people have the access, ability, or resources to speak for themselves? In emergencies, some degree of speaking for others may be necessary and justified. The question that remains is how did the images inspire such simplistic judgments, especially ones as opposed as the culture versus nature take? This is the question addressed in my next section.

Identity and Difference: Urban and Suburban

The news media photographs of Katrina operate according to a documentary mode of seeing with

two primary results. First, the images are thought to represent a realistic depiction of the traumatic and devastating event. Second, the images place viewers in a position of judgment above, detached from, and outside the world represented in those images. Why, then, did such divergent, oppositional evaluations surface? As representations of reality, the images place the viewer in an evaluative frame that relies on the discrimination of identity and difference. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (1970) traces the emergence of representation as the fundamental basis for Western knowledge to the first half of the seventeenth century. Whereas before signs were thought to proceed from resemblance (i.e., a sign signifies based upon its similitude with the thing signified), in this period, thinkers believe the sign relates to the signified through representation. In other words, the sign represents without a necessary, nonarbitrary connection to the thing represented. Thought no longer consists in drawing things together based on resemblance but, on the contrary, in discriminating through the comparison of identity and difference. Foucault (1970) concludes, “Western reason is entering the age of judgment” (p. 61).

This may be a difficult way of saying that judgment depends on the thoughtful discrimination between identity and difference, but Foucault’s archaeological investigation demonstrates the basic import of this conceptualization to the unfolding of Western thought. In the era of representation, the subject makes evaluations through their analysis of identity and difference. Within the practice of documentary photorealism, the viewer is asked to make a judgment about a real event. However, the images offer little guidance for their judgments, as shown by the divergent evaluations of the disaster. Instead, the viewer must interpret the elements in order to make a judgment. These interpretations rely on the viewer’s assumptions of identity and difference. Some viewers identify the scene as a natural disaster, seeing this as the only realistic explanation. Others identify the scene as a cultural catastrophe, seeing the “real” cause of racist politicians. Both judgments stem from the viewer’s identifications. Asked to judge realistically but provided little guidance, viewer’s fall back on familiar (often stereotypical) explanations. The viewer who previously identifies a racist system sees in Katrina a real



> *Eric Gray. © 2005. The Associated Press. Original in color.*

example of racism and, hence, a cultural disaster. The viewer who instead, identifies otherwise, dismisses the cultural explanation, seeing a natural disaster. In short, both explanations inhere in the stance of judgment, varying according to the familiar identifications of the viewer.

Of course, numerous factors beyond the images contribute to how the audience identifies with the Katrina disaster and its victims, such as party affiliation, other public commentary, the discursive framing, and socio-economic status. Yet, the images also certainly played a role, as demonstrated by my forthcoming analysis and much of the audience-response research conducted since the disaster occurred (noted later). The divergent (cultural and natural) evaluations point to differing identificational possibilities in the photographs. These possibilities primarily relate to the scene featured in the images. The scene is distinctly urban, suggesting those who identify with an urban landscape may be more likely to attribute the devastation to cultural factors. On the other hand, subur-

ban identification creates an impetus to attribute the devastation to uncontrollable natural forces. First, I contrast the features of the urban and suburban landscape, and then I describe how the images primarily portray an urban scene. Finally, I isolate two different identificational possibilities—drawing on urban or suburban assumptions, through two examples: President Bush's speech in New Orleans and the response of hip-hop artists to the devastation, exemplified by Kanye West's infamous tirade against the President.

The Urban and Suburban in Katrina Imagery

It may be helpful to visualize the suburb as a utopia in the literal sense—a no-place with bland strip-malls, cookie cutter subdivisions, and chain restaurants.⁵ The activist-author Rebecca Solnit (2001) prefers the term “postplace,” depicting Silicon Valley as the stereotypical “postindustrial, postcommunal, postrural, and posturban” suburbia (p. 115).

The maze serves as Solnit's (2001) metaphor for suburbia, a place without center, featuring "myriad clusters of industry and housing, with commuters jamming in every direction" (p. 116). The most distinctive element of the maze is the near-total evaporation of public spaces into the privatized grid of gated communities and shopping malls. A suburb is a gated or secluded cluster of private property, peopled by commuters and marked by clean streets and manicured lawns. Few people, outside of children, dot the sidewalks and streets of suburbia; there is a strict emphasis on quiet and solitude. In many respects, the spaces for public assembly are designed out of the neighborhoods. The most likely place to find crowds of people is at the corner convenience store or the mega-shopping center that recently replaced the last rural holdout across the street.

What is most noticeable in the Katrina photos is the almost complete absence of suburban characteristics. The images vividly portray the striking contrast between the urban and suburban place. All that is present in suburbia is absent and vice-versa. Instead of clean and manicured neighborhoods, the images show piling trash and sparse plant life. This is a concrete jungle, with few kids playing in their yards but hundreds of persons milling about the streets. In some pictures, cars pass by the stranded victims, but this is not a place of cars or commuters. Helicopters, buses, boats, and military vehicles are far more common. Glorious chain strip malls are rare while shattered local store fronts are prevalent. This is not a decentralized, privatized, and isolated place. The Superdome, featured heavily in the photos, is public space and the clear center of the tragedy, offering some shelter but little solitude. The Katrina photographs provide a brief glimpse into everyday urban realities—public, dirty, concrete, and African-American.

The most disturbing element of the photos is the image of blackness interacting with whiteness. The Eric Gay photo is illustrative. We see the hundreds of victims and mounds of trash lining the sides of the image. We notice the women's expressions of anger and disgust. The police, their weapons, and their enormous vehicle all add a presence that contributes to the desperation of the scene. A photo

shopping of this image in *Counterpunch* precisely fingers the source of anxiety produced by the photos (LaBotz, 2005). Credited to a Japanese proverb, the superimposed caption reads, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." The photo begs the question: "Is the military assisting or invading?" Some of the images are undoubtedly government agents helping victims. Others are assuredly police officials arresting "looters." However, so many more offer confusing answers. We see people, like the women in Gay's photograph, yelling at the military officials. And we see an impressive hammer when the situation seems to call for a velvet glove. President Bush apparently disagrees. To a surprisingly quiet chorus of criticism, he used Katrina to call for greater federal and military authority during disasters ("President discusses hurricane relief in address to nation," 2005).

The images can reinforce an all-too-familiar myth—the White forces of good guarding against the Black forces of evil—White order versus Black disorder. The photographs frequently show a militarized zone, reminiscent of many rappers' violent lyrical portrayals of police confrontations in the ghetto. In this image environment, can it be any surprise that rumors of looters, random acts of violence, and attacks against rescue workers ran wild?⁶ Despite the official denouncements, many continue to believe the exaggerated, hysterical, and racist rumors recently derided by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek (2005) claims the stories serve a fantasy role, and perhaps the fantasy is the suburban utopia. Both Solnit (2001) and Wimsatt (1994) associate the suburb with security guards and gates. As Solnit (2001) argues, "Whatever is inside the wall, past the gate, protected by the guard, is imagined as some version of paradise, but only paradise so long as its separateness is protected, which means that paradise is a violent place" (p. 123). Contrasted with this paradise, the images can be (and have been) seen as justifications for suburbia's highly militarized status.

As a final feature, I must emphasize that most of the guards were Anglo whereas most of the victims were African-American. Suburbia is an Anglo place, never more evident than in the face-to-face photographs. Three features, contrasted from sub-

urban places, stand out up-close. The first is the predominance of African-American bodies, the ancestors of slaves once again afflicted by both nature and culture. The second are the marks of pain, from tearful expressions of sorrow or loss to clinched gestures of anger or disgust. Pain is embodied, temporal, in a place, not the happily-ever-after land of utopia suburbia. Just imagine the smiling faces of home realtor commercials juxtaposed with the crying boy image. Finally, all of the faces are noisy. They are crying, screaming, wailing, and moaning. They pierce through suburban quietude to express urban commotion. The realities of Katrina are written on noisy, pained, African-American faces, featured in a distinctly urban scene.

The Urban and Suburban: Kanye West versus George W. Bush

Two responses typify the identificational possibilities within the urban-suburban division. The first is President Bush's address to the nation on September 15th. His speech amply illustrates the suburban perspective and certainly clarifies his insistence that Katrina was a natural disaster. Only a moderately wealthy spectator can easily say, "Americans have never left our destiny to the whims of nature, and we will not start now" ("President discusses hurricane," 2005). Throughout the speech, Bush constructs an image of a rebuilt Gulf Coast via subtle suburban references. He emphasizes home ownership, longs for the return of playing children, and insists the steeples will be rebuilt even higher. One may think of Solnit's "myriad clusters of industry and housing" or my own depiction of "cookie-cutter strip malls" when Bush declares, "When the streets are rebuilt, there should be many new businesses, including minority-owned businesses, along those streets" ("President discusses hurricane," 2005). Tellingly, his speech only refers to one specific place in New Orleans—the famous streetcars on Charles Street. Since I never visited the streetcars, I turned to the web for insight (Nelson, 2005). The streetcars appear to be tourist attractions, and, ironically, most of the pictures feature Anglo patrons guided by an African-American driver. Furthermore, the tour passes a statue of Robert E. Lee and multiple Civil War era mansions.

The mansion of Captain Watson Van Benthuyzen, II was constructed after the famous "Yankee in Grey" fled Virginia during the war. Van Benthuyzen was related to Jefferson Davis and fought for the Confederacy. He helped found the streetcar line. For the suburban tourist, New Orleans was a fun place to peer at monuments. For instance, shortly after the disaster President Bush apparently reminisced about his own fun times drinking in New Orleans. For the urban-minded, however, the President appears out of touch.

For our second example, identification with the urban scene may explain why Kanye West dropped a vocal bomb on live television. In perhaps the most sublime moment in recent network history, he audaciously declared during a benefit telethon, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" (de Moraes, 2005). His response was not atypical.⁷ Nearly every hip-hop artist donated time, money, or effort to the recovery. Innumerable benefit concerts were performed. Local natives such as T.I. and David Banner organized trips to New Orleans to assist the rescue. Even Jay-Z and P. Diddy donated clothing from their fashion lines. MC David Banner (2005), after twice sending his tour bus full of water, food, and clothing, lays it out, "How can David Banner, a so-called 'gangsta rapper,' react quicker to a crisis than our own government?" (p. 58).

The connection between place and hip-hop is well documented, most notably by Murray Forman (2002) in *The Hood Comes First*. Hip-hop's history is one distinctly defined by the emergence of new styles closely tied to specific locales, such as L.A. gangsta rap, Houston's screwed and chopped style, and Atlanta's crunk. Through their lyrics, videos, and affiliations, hip-hop artists consistently identify with urban places. The others visually portrayed in the devastation were, as Wolf Blitzer blubbered, "so poor" and "so Black" (Jackson, 2005). The poor, African-American people are hip-hop's clan; the New Orleans ghetto is hip-hop's place. The foundation of collective memory, common experiences of devastation in poor African-American communities, provided the grounds for identification. For the urban artist, the places do not represent some distant and foreign locale subject to the vertiginous whims of nature. These

places recall home. In the context of such memories, Katrina looks increasingly like a cultural disaster. Identification with the urban creates the possibility of a cultural explanation.

To summarize and return to the modes of seeing, the realistic frame of the documentary mode inherently includes both identificational possibilities. The viewer is positioned to judge the images as realistic depictions. Therefore, viewers are most likely to accept the explanation of the images that most closely matches their own perceptions of "reality." Just as hip-hop artists are likely to see the images of police officers struggling against African-American people as further evidence of expected racism, many Anglo, conservative viewers readily accept rumors of looting and random violence as "realistic" given the urban scene. The realistic frame creates a tendency to fall back upon (stereo-) typical assumptions and expectations that appear to match the viewer's own conceptions of reality. This explains why, according to a recent Pew poll, 71 percent of African-Americans felt that Katrina shows that racial inequality remains a major problem, whereas 56 percent of Anglos thought this was not an important lesson (Kurtz, 2005). This explanation also clarifies the results of audience analysis studies of Katrina images focusing on racial cues. One study by Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin (2006) found that, amongst their primarily Anglo audience, images of the disaster featuring Anglo victims evoked a stronger sympathetic response in the form of willingness to give more aid for a longer period of time when compared to the same images featuring victims of other races. Identification is a potent rhetorical force, especially in the context of a realistic frame that accompanies the documentary mode of photojournalism.

Conclusions: Signs of the End

Signs—makeshift signs—best represent the urban/suburban contrast at play in the Katrina pictures. Many signs, like the one above, try desperately to hold onto the secluded, private, orderly, and Anglo utopia of suburbia—with force if necessary. Other signs list names, signaling people either miss-

ing or seeking help. The policed, public, dilapidated, and concrete urban environment has lost many souls, but the poor, African-American residents remain alive. These places, urban and suburban, shape social identification and, hence, response. When positioned as a detached, distant, and external judge, it becomes all too easy to fall back on these familiar and stereotypical identifications.

The White/Black, urban/suburban, and nature/culture binaries present in this read of Katrina images are not essential, deterministic categories. Many Anglo and suburban residents reacted swiftly and altruistically, whereas some African-American and urban inhabitants remained apathetic. Some conservatives faulted Bush; some liberals held him blameless. However, both identificational possibilities inhere in a mode of seeing that casts the viewer in the role of judge, demanding their evaluation through the discrimination of identity and difference. The problem is that neither dominant explanation goes very far in addressing the underlying causes of the disaster. The natural explanation attempts to free the status-quo from guilt. Blaming racist politicians is likewise too easy and too conspiratorial to advance understanding of such a singular and complex event. As Solnit (2001) contends, "Blaming social and environmental problems entirely on culture can mean overlooking economics, politics, and systems of power" (p. 12).

The important question is how these simplistic evaluations were inspired and shaped. In this vein, three conclusions seem appropriate. First, my analysis validates Abel's conclusions about the importance of the style of images. How the images are portrayed, according to what points of view and perspectives, seems at least as important to understanding their social effectivity as what is portrayed in the images. The cultural assumptions that photographs represent a "true" or "natural" slice of reality frequently deflect attention from the aesthetic elements of news media images. The assumptions of neutrality and objectivity need to be jettisoned in favor of more critical attention to the style of photojournalism. Objectivity is a grounded stance that structures the modes of seeing and the concomitant evaluations, regardless of the intentions to remain neutral.

If these Katrina images can be generalized, the documentary perspective seems to encourage modes of seeing from the outside, above, and at a distance that articulate to numerous stale cultural binaries. The positioning of viewers outside, above, and detached from the image-objects constructs a hierarchical and disinterested stance conducive to a judgmental disposition. Views from outside promote a sense of no-place; the suburban spectator watches the drama unfold from the distant comforts of home. Views from a distance and above support an objectifying and moralizing response by effacing difference, resulting in the Third World label and a paternalistic refusal of resident participation in their own community redevelopment (Davis, 2005). The wide angles and long distances paint ambiguous portrayals at best, distancing viewers and victims while often reinforcing the racist fears of suburban America.

The central point here is that the documentary mode tends to turn the people within the images into objects by distancing the viewer from the image world. Sontag (1977) contends that the aesthetic distance “seems built into the very experience of looking at photography,” anesthetizing the viewer and creating sentimentalism, never “ethical or political knowledge” (pp. 20–21, 23–24). Finnegan (2001a) concurs, adding that this distancing is amplified when photographs are seen as art (p. 54). Although developing alternatives is beyond the scope of this article, a quick look at some alternatives, particularly those inspired by artistic technique, questions the conclusions of Sontag and Finnegan. Many photographers are challenging the objectifying documentary mode. Solnit (2001) notes a shift in landscape photography from the modes of documentary realism to modes that concentrate on the significance of substance.⁸ Rather than seeing substance as neutral matter, this approach sees all substance as already having meaning. “Substance suggests that meaning is inherent in the world rather than something that needs to be inscribed upon it” (Solnit, 2001, pp. 52–53). In other words, such modes challenge the divide between subject and object set up in the documentary mode. Rather than portraying substances in the image as objects, they are seen as subjects in their own right. The nature/culture

divide is also questioned, seeing both as substances that speak. Rather than nature being the object of culture, both act and interact.

Photographically, two techniques challenge the subject/object divide. In the first, linear perspective is abandoned. Instead of peering into the image, substance occupies the entire space of the image, preventing the viewer from looking beyond or into the image. Background is eliminated in favor of foreground. The image does not construct a space inside a window but instead projects substance into the viewer’s world. As Solnit puts it, “I am thinking of the many photographs in which foliage, or rubble, or lava, or dirt crowds the foreground of the image, producing nature without landscape, without scenery, without liberating prospects, vistas, views, or distances—nature in your face” (p. 59). Second, photographic modes can position the viewer inside the image. They make visible the traditionally invisible lines of perspective or construct images that include multiple points of view. So, for instance, the body of the photographer may extend into the image, or, the photography may be combined with performance or installation pieces that emphasize the viewer’s positioning and participation. If my analysis is correct, the second technique may be furthered by points of view different from the dominant positions of the documentary mode—from inside the scene, from below and frontally engaged with the subjects in the image.

In relation to Katrina, a photographic series by David Julian entitled “Taken from the Heart: Images of Intimate Loss After Katrina” provides an example of the first technique.⁹ The photographs feature personal objects such as family portraits, toys, dolls, books, and religious relics, all visibly ruined by the floodwaters. These personal objects (substances) are shot up close, presented to the viewer rather than placed in a scene. The water-logged substances challenge the division between subject and object because, in their touching features, they reveal the subjective personalities behind them, the ghostly traces of personal loss. As Julian explains, “Amidst the devastation, I made a series of photographic portraits—not to describe the enormity of their loss but rather the wrenching subtlety of it: the tender minutiae. The once-whole personalities

brought into relief by the decomposing detail that remained. Taken from the empathy in my heart, these photographs record what was taken from their hearts.”

Such images, rather than objectifying the victims, subjectifies them by making these objects speak for their loss. It brings their loss into the viewer’s world, asking the viewer not to judge but to feel their pain. The documentary mode, portraying humans as objects, encourages viewers to rely on familiar stereotypes such as African-American people are ignorant (for not leaving) or violent. Julian’s series avoids such familiar judgments by creating a different set of identifications. The subjectified objects, such as books, toys, and mementos, are familiar in the viewer’s own world, further driving home the devastation of the loss. Such images encourage empathy rather than sympathy, short circuiting the drive to objectify the victims and, in turn, speak for them.

Solnit (2001) shows many examples of the second technique in her chapter on the camera (pp. 90–108). These examples mix nature and culture, viewer and scene, in ways that problematize the aesthetic distance. One in particular seems relevant for the Katrina context. Zig Rising Buffalo Jackson compiled a series of photographs, the title of which perfectly describes the content: *Indian Photographing Tourists Photographing Indians*. The images question the “consumption and documentation of indigenous cultures by people who seemed to imagine themselves as invisible subjects rather than camera-ready objects” (Solnit, 2001, pp. 104–105). The pictures expose the invisible position of the viewer, along with the voyeuristic act of consumption. Perhaps an extension can be made to the Katrina context. A striking feature of the Katrina images is the sheer magnitude—thousands of pictures, necessitating numerous photographers—while none include reporters. One can imagine hungry, thirsty, drowning people being mass-photographed as they cry for help. This is a bit absurd, and maybe reporters performed valiant deeds; but the documentary mode precludes their appearance in (at least) the images of the disaster. Sontag (1977) believes part of the horror of such photographs stems from this nonintervention, in which the photographer chooses the image over life (p.

12). However, Jackson’s photos problematize Sontag’s pessimism, illustrating how photography can be used to question the distance between viewer and image. Instead of sentimentalism, a series of Katrina photographs similar to Jacsakon’s would produce an ethical and political knowledge, exposing the common, voyeuristic consumption of disaster.

The deficiencies of a judgmental perspective extend beyond this objectification and the related dangers of speaking for others, leading to my second conclusion. Here, the problem is not so much the stance of judgment but the speed at which it occurs. The rush to judge contributes to both the stale evaluations of the problem and the spread of stereotypical assumptions. In the rush to judge, wanton rumors of urban violence spread like wildfire. In the rush to judge, viewers fall back on comfortable and familiar assumptions about reality. In these realistic images, some see a natural disaster and scoff at liberals who see racist politicians. Others think they witness a cultural disaster resulting from the intentional foot-dragging of the powers-that-be. The rush to judge, fomented by the perspective of the photographs, inspires a conservative “response-ability.” We respond, we judge, according to our pre-existing political and cultural identifications. The judgmental perspective creates a recipe for division and stagnation, reproducing the stale binaries of conservative/liberal, public/private, and cultural/natural that continually limit our political possibilities. In place of the obsession with speed, deferral of judgment may be the only antidote for a polis that seems to be trenchantly and tendentiously divided on nearly every political issue.

Unfortunately, the news media, in the drive for sensationalism and up-to-the-minute reporting, does not value delay or deferral. The need for speed leads the media to focus on events rather than underlying causes, which may be slow to unfold and invisible to the naked eye. Solnit concludes, “The media, with their emphasis on eventfulness, have little ability to respond, at best issuing reports on the progression of crises that punctuate the long ebb of an economy, a culture, an environment” (p. 167). What results is the tendency to oversimplify the event, reducing Katrina to cultural

or natural reasons rather than engaging in a more time-consuming and complex explanation of the underlying causes. Solnit connects the drive for speed with two primary technologies of modernism—the gun and the car. And, as this article illustrates, both the gun and the car have an intimate connection with the suburb. Yet, the implication of the rush to judge, of the drive for speed, is not yet another critique of the suburb. What is lost in the rush to judge is more complex understandings of current events.

Some may argue that the camera, since it freezes a snapshot of time, cannot be expected to articulate complex causes that are slow-moving and largely invisible. However, many artists and activists are now constructing modes that allow us to see the invisible, such as the consequences of global warming or the elimination of wetlands. For instance, Chris Jordan (2006) constructed a photographic series entitled, "In Katrina's Wake: Portraits of Loss From an Unnatural Disaster."¹⁰ His photographs feature common and often trivial consumer products, such as beads, clothes, plastic bottles, and toys, mixed into mud, water, dirt, weeds, and trees. The images all suggest the connection between nature and culture, consumption and environmental devastation.¹¹ They undeniably associate the devastation with the issues of poverty and ecological destruction. Similarly, Solnit (2001) discusses the emergence of "salvage photography, which documents disappearing people and places" (p. 167). She seems to preemptively describe Jordan's Katrina photos when she notes the trend for photographing dirt. Photographing dirt abandons mapping from above, through the aerial view of the voyeur god. Cameras "incline downward, to the earth, describing not the inhabitable space but the surfaces coextensive with the picture plane" (Solnit, 2001, p. 159). The distance between viewer and image, camera and earth, is lessened.

While Jordan's camera does not always aim downward, he reproduces a similar logic through similar modes. The photographs show the results of a process that required time, speed, and force to produce—the mixing and melding of nature and culture in water, wind, debris, and dirt. They thereby make visibly slow and usually invisible processes. Focusing on the process of the event, rather than

the outcomes in terms of human victims, allows different questions to be asked. By showing the ecological devastation of Katrina, tied to the literal overflow of consumer goods, an ecological explanation is proffered. Furthermore, the Jordan photos, although offering an evaluation, provide a counter-explanation to the common judgments along the nature versus culture line. Nature and culture are inextricably intertwined, mashed up and mixed together. Thus, the photos help to slow-down the dominant evaluations by contrasting them with a different perspective.

The dilemmas of rapid judgment point to my third conclusion—the desperate need for alternative modes of seeing. DeLillo's essay helps outline two crucial elements of any alternative: the deferral of judgment and the presentation of numerous points of view. By suspending judgment through the juxtaposition of numerous perspectives on 9/11, DeLillo challenges the rush to evaluate and ascribe meaning to the event. Instead of allowing the viewer to identify with familiar and comfortable political positions, his approach places all such evaluations, all such points of view, in question. As Abel (2003) puts it, "Instead of providing readers with a stable viewpoint—and thus the possibility of identification—the confused narrative perspective calls attention to the impossibility of (identifying with) a clear view of the event" (p. 1244). What is needed, then, is for photojournalism to adopt a plurality of modes of seeing. During Katrina, one photographer, Edward Richards (2006), advances a similar criticism, faulting photojournalists for not venturing out beyond New Orleans and focusing too much on the human angle. Richards claims to take the perspective of an artist, rather than a photojournalist, and his images feature flaws in the built environment. Through pictures of collapsed houses and cracked foundations, he hopes to document the effect on the built environment as "a great way to get people to understand the long-term problems that most emergency planning ignores."

Appropriately, Edwards series is entitled, "Katrina: Another View." Other views, other modes of seeing, are crucial to challenge the objectifying documentary mode and slowdown the rush to judge. Beyond the familiar culture/nature divide,

more critical explanations for the Katrina disaster do exist. The photos of Jackson, Jordan, and Richards, along with the new modes detailed by Solnit, provide some preliminary models. Promoting modes of seeing with the possibilities for a Marxist, environmentalist, feminist, or anti-racist explanation is the imperative task that remains.

If the fallout from Katrina is any indication, imagining and imaging different points of view may be crucial to overcoming the stereotypical and divisive politics of the status quo.

Notes

Due to space limitations, the endnotes for this article can be found at: http://www.vcquarterly.org/jenkins_notes.html

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