

TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY

Jules David Prown has developed a method of examining and extracting cultural evidence from mute objects such as paintings, photographs, and everyday objects like chairs, clocks, and tables using three steps—and it is with this method that I will be looking at the photograph “VJ-Day Kiss” by Alfred Eisenstaedt. Through observation, we contemplate the general shapes and subjects of the photograph: the flow of lines and shadows that bring us to the focal point. Deduction brings us closer to the feelings, sights, smells, and sounds, as well as the emotions wrought from viewing; is this a scene of celebration or a scene of struggle? Finally, speculation helps us draw some meaning from the photograph as to what importance this scene holds in history and the values and ideals it upholds. Prown’s method helps dig deeper than the superficiality of a first glance. What originally appears to be a celebration full of life and wonder can be deducted through his method as the photographic capture of a sexual assault in progress. With this method we can observe the two-faced passion of “VJ-day Kiss”: both the overwhelming jubilation and the underlying conflict.

First, I look at the shot and make note of what is there: the basic outline and subject matter. The black and white photograph is a vertical shot of a sailor and a nurse kissing amidst a crowd in Times Square. The most notable feature of the photo is the stark contrast in their apparel: the sailor is wearing a dark navy uniform, the nurse a dress, tights, and shoes, all a vibrant white. The shadows of the picture are soft and subtle, and the kissing bodies curve in a way that is appealing to the eye and visual line of the photograph. The two people are the focal point of the shot; the path of

the eye starts at their faces, goes down their bodies, and then comes back around to the man's hand on the woman's waist by way of a shadow on the street. The open space provided by the break in the background's buildings also leads the eye straight to the couple. The depth of field leaves the kissing figures sharp and clear, with the watching crowd blurry in the back and foreground, and seemingly scattering out from behind them. All these lines come together to frame the shot. The fact that the couple's bodies are in full view suggests that the photographer is a few paces away, possibly farther. The breadth he has designated them gives a sense of separation, suggesting that he has no personal connection to either of the two people. It suggests that the photographer, and henceforth the viewer, is perceiving this scene as a passerby, as just another part of the crowd.

Given the objects in the photograph, and this important observation that it is a crowd scene and that every person is connected by only this one overpowering event, it is vital to recognize what the crowd might be feeling and how we might experience things if we were within the picture. Putting myself in this position, I can almost feel the excitement reverberating through the air in Times Square. People amass together, coming from every building, every street, every clearing, shouting and cheering with the news of our victory. The late afternoon sun warms our skin, casting a soft light on all the happenings. It smells like people here: the sharp sweat of hard labor, the light perfume of women, the brisk clean smell of aftershave. People of all ages are kissing, hugging, and shouting. It is mid-August, and the summer air is sweet with celebration.

As we continue our deductions, we find that running through the crowd are sailors, drunk on both booze and joy, grabbing women of all ages and sizes and planting kisses on their lips. Their arrival would add new scents to the air: the sharp tang of alcohol and the faded spice of sea air. Eisenstaedt would be running through through the crowd until he noticed the nurse and paused, bringing the camera to his eye. Mere seconds later, a man would burst through the masses and grab the woman, push her back into an arch and lean down to kiss her. The crowd would cry with amusement as the flash went off again and again. The man's arms, the only thing keeping the woman from the ground, would strain against the pull of her weight. In the photograph we can see that he clutches her to him, his grip like a lightened choke-hold as she grasps at her skirt and purse. We are

but delighted outsiders witnessing the embodiment of what the crowd is feeling—and yet, something is wrong.

The spontaneous, grasping passion of victory, the intense desire the masses feel to celebrate in every possible way, is embodied in this one action. There is an overwhelming sense of joy in this photo, layered thickly upon surprise and disbelief, even distaste. Once the kiss is done, who knows what will happen? The nurse might slap the sailor. She might laugh at him. She might cry at the sheer absurdity of it all. It is the unknown, the spontaneity of the moment, and the unforeseen wonders and consequences of its occurrence that make this kiss so powerful. It is the issues and sheer violence of the passion paired with that wonder that makes this photograph so completely uncomfortable. The viewer can't help but experience the same emotions of the crowd: joy, surprise, disgust. This photograph forces us to think about the events that brought these two together and the aftermath of the kiss that defined a nation.

My initial reactions to this photograph were the same sort of heart-warming happiness the crowd obviously feels. The feelings of passion and celebration are like an aura around it, impossible to ignore. Looking closer, however, and thinking back to how abruptly forceful the kiss must have been, one can observe the confining nature of the man's arms, the silent struggle of the nurse, and the amusement of the surrounding crowd. It pushes you to think, how must it have felt to be grabbed like that? To have someone's lips forced on your own? The mere idea that this woman might have not wanted this kiss, that she was forced into it, leaves a sort of unpleasant aftertaste to the initial joy in viewing this photograph. Despite the sailor's good intentions—to celebrate, to spread the love—this woman can be seen as silently screaming, completely disgusted with what has been forced upon her, horrified at the nearby photographer and subsequent flashes of the camera. If this is in fact the case, this photograph's place as a national symbol of victory might be ridden with undertones of the wrongs done in the name of good, freedom, and happiness. The man's apparent dominance over the woman can even be said to mirror the dominance of the rambunctious, untame, spontaneous nature of war and the complete domination of the US over Japan. The picture shows the power of a nation's support and gratitude through the mere fact of its existence, but it also proves the underlying caution, surprise, and distaste towards war in

spite of all the powerfully good feelings it can bring. Eisenstaedt clearly wants us to recognize the violent, powerful grip of the man, twisting the woman's body to his wants and will. He wants us to recognize the sickening undertone to an otherwise joyful, celebratory picture, and that as a whole, this photograph is of an action that in its occurrence may represent war and the conditions of victory.

Victory, being subjective to whomever is experiencing it and how it is accomplished, holds a variety of emotions for both the winners and losers. The man in this case would be victorious over the woman, who doesn't have the strength or heart to make him stop. All she can do is clutch feebly at herself and wait for release, all the while perhaps thinking, "He fought for this country, for me. He deserves this." The man, blinded by emotions and perhaps even an ideal of male superiority, does what he wants. Following the kiss or later in his life, he might feel a sense of shame in his action. The power of the parade, of the gathering and the joy, is a weak excuse for his complete domination of this anonymous girl. He can't hide behind the fact that he was drunk, excited, overwhelmed with a need for passion, a need to outlet his joy. His victory is her loss; his jubilation is her violent experience. In the end, it's all relative of who experienced what. Eisenstaedt, in making this photograph a cultural icon, seeks to ask all Americans a question: At what cost are we joyful? Victorious? What sense of humanity have we discarded in our quest for victory? Looking back on this event, he calls to us: Remember the kiss that captured it all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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