

**THE *LIFE* OF WERNER WOLFF:
AN ANALYSIS OF WERNER WOLFF'S
CONTRIBUTIONS TO *LIFE* MAGAZINE**

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Master of Arts, 2014

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Film and Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

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Abstract

Werner Wolff (1911-2002) was a photojournalist who worked through the Black Star photographic agency for over forty years, and his work appeared in 120 stories in *Life* magazine. Wolff's work is not much discussed in the history of photography, as his career lacked the drama and influence of other photojournalists. Using the contact sheets and negatives related to six stories published between 1946 and 1957 in *Life* housed in the Ryerson Image Centre's Werner Wolff Archive, as well as a full run of *Life*, this thesis explores how *Life* used this unknown photographer, and how the trivial subjects of his assignments were a valued part of the magazine. This thesis will demonstrate that Wolff's qualities as a photographer simultaneously prevented him from becoming famous within the field and made him a successful and valuable contributor to the most widely read picture magazine of the twentieth century.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Life magazine was immensely important to American culture in the middle of the 20th century, exerting a tremendous influence.¹ Photography historian Gisèle Freund said of *Life*, “Its success was unique and its format imitated almost everywhere.”² The magazine is known for its use of photographic essays shot by some of the most renowned photojournalists working during *Life*’s 36 year run between 1936 and 1972. Its legacy has been one of high-quality photographic essays and political and cultural influence wielded by the conservative co-founder Henry Luce. However, the magazine contained much more than the dramatic photographic essays of W. Eugene Smith, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alfred Eisenstaedt; it had to fill over 100 pages weekly, which meant that it needed content, of which the photographic essay could form only a relatively small portion. The rest of the magazine was made up of news items and public interest stories which were often illustrated with photographs produced by lesser-known or agency photographers, such as Werner Wolff.

Wolff was a German-born immigrant to the United States, who got his start working under Alfred Eisenstaedt at Pix Inc. in 1936. Wolff entered the United States Army and shot photographs for *YANK* magazine during World War II. After the war, he began working as a photojournalist for the Black Star photographic agency out of New York City. He shot

¹ Erika Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 3-4; John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America 1741-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 170-172, 235; Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 57.

² Gisèle Freund, *Photography & Society* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1980), 141.

assignments for many magazines, as well as working extensively for corporate clients.³ Wolff's work appeared in 112 different issues of the magazine in 120 different stories, even though his photographs were rarely printed in the "Photographic Essay" department. His large body of work can be attributed to his constant presence in the Black Star office and his willingness to take on any job offered.⁴

Wolff worked for the Black Star agency for over forty years, between the 1940's and 1980's, and shot many different subjects throughout his career – including political events, architecture, and industry. Wolff was able and willing to photograph in any genre, shooting portraits, still lifes and spot news coverage. He worked on assignment throughout his career, with little personal relationship to his subjects. Wolff's photographs appeared in sections of the magazine ranging from "Industry" to "Medicine" and "Sports", and most frequently in "The Week's Events" department of the magazine. The photographs he produced were flexible in style, and could be counted on to fill any gap in coverage. Wolff's photojournalistic output was not the work of an advocate, but rather of a professional who provided visual content to clients. As an agency photographer, he had no expectation of having control over the way his photographs were used. This type of modest photojournalism has not been discussed in literature about *Life* magazine, as historians prefer to write about the tumultuous lives led by

³ Sara Manco's Master's thesis contains a finding aid for the Werner Wolff Archive which includes an extensive biographical sketch of Wolff. Manco conducted interviews with Wolff's son and colleagues in order to provide the most complete biography of Wolff available. For further reference on Wolff's life, refer to the "Biographical Sketch" and "Werner Wolff Life Chronology" sections of Manco's thesis. Sara Manco, "Finding Wolff: Intellectually Arranging the Werner Wolff Fonds at the Ryerson Image Centre" (Master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2012), 24-27.

⁴ Sara Manco, "Finding Wolff", 2012, 16-17.

other photographers, even though the egoless production of large quantities of photographs was necessary for *Life*'s editors to produce and put out a magazine each week.

The Ryerson Image Centre's Werner Wolff Archive provides a unique opportunity to study this type of photography. The archive contains material related to 1,125 different assignments shot for *Black Star*, as well as personal work, ephemera, and work shot for the United States armed forces magazine, *Yank*. The material related to each assignment varies, with most files including negatives, many containing contact sheets, and some having typed documents, tear sheets, and other related material. Seeing these materials allows for an object-based look at the methods of a photojournalist and of the most famous picture magazine, *Life*. Using the archive and a complete run of *Life*, I will explain how Wolff's photographs—and by extension the photographs of other agency photographers—were used by the magazine, while also explaining what qualities made Wolff a successful photojournalist.

I have identified three major uses of Wolff's photographs by *Life* magazine. The first and by far rarest form of his work was as illustrative support for long, written stories. Images performing this role generally appeared in the "Articles" section of the magazine in which visual content was secondary to the text, showing the subject of the piece, but not adding information. The second use was when the magazine's editors employed Wolff's images to make an entire piece, driven primarily by photographs but without other photographers' work. These vary greatly in length, from one or two pages, to several spreads. The third and most common way *Life* utilised Wolff's work was in conjunction with other photographers' images to create picture stories. Often one or more of Wolff's images showed a specific aspect of a larger subject, such as a portrait of an important figure, or a local aspect of a national news item.

These three uses of Wolff's work will be explored in detail to demonstrate the differences in image choice, and provide insight into *Life's* methods. Comparisons between included and excluded images will be made using the negatives and contact sheets from selected assignments in each category in order to reveal which aspects of Wolff's photography *Life* employed in different situations.

I will be looking at Wolff's contributions to a feature about existentialism from 1946 and a story about the makers of the game of Scrabble from 1953, which were published in the "Articles" department and are primarily text-based. The solo use of Wolff's work will be represented by an analysis of a short piece about a carnival game involving a goldfish race from 1948, and a longer picture story about a new type of egg packaging from 1956. In the collaborative use, Wolff contributed two photographs to a news item about a railway strike in 1946, and one of his photographs of a presidential candidate was printed in a large segment about the 1948 election campaign. I will also be describing and analysing both of these stories. These examples will show what Wolff's photographs looked like in different publication contexts, and looking at the contact sheets and negatives will demonstrate what choices the editorial staff made, revealing their content production methods in greater detail.

All of the selected stories were published between 1946 and 1957; this span was chosen because those are the first and last years that Wolff's photographs were used in four or more stories per year in *Life*. Each selected article will provide insight into what roles his photographs served in the magazine, and the qualities that made Wolff a successful photojournalist and kept the *Life* editors using his photographs. The illustrative works regarding existentialism and Scrabble will reveal that much of the photographic content of the

magazine was secondary to other content – in these cases written text and advertisements, respectively. The picture stories about the goldfish game and the egg packaging will show the subject matter and technical abilities present in Wolff's work. The contributions Wolff made to the coverage of a train strike and an election will help to explain the gaps in coverage Wolff filled and the photographic aesthetic used by Wolff and *Life* magazine.

Wolff was not the type of photojournalist that gets much attention in the history of photography – his work for *Life* generally covered trivial subjects, often filled gaps in coverage, and lacked a clear, unique aesthetic. He was, however, technically skilled, able to use lighting, framing, and point of view to achieve his goals and to provide flexible content for the editors of the magazine to use as they pleased. Wolff was immensely useful to *Life*, and his success reveals what the magazine valued in its photographers. Using both the magazine and archival material, I will explain how and why the qualities which prevented him from attaining greater personal renown made Wolff a valuable asset to the makers of *Life*.

Chapter 2: Literature Survey

This literature survey is meant to give an overview of historical, technical and analytical texts related to the production of picture stories in *Life* magazine, and to the career of Werner Wolff. The survey will provide support for a study of photojournalistic practice in the work of Werner Wolff and its use in *Life* magazine. Referenced in the following survey are histories of photography and technical manuals on the methods of both photojournalists and magazine picture editors. These sources will contextualize the work of Wolff in the histories of photography and photojournalism, show how those histories have been written, and elucidate how *Life* approached making a picture magazine. This literature survey will also demonstrate that there has not yet been an object-based analysis of *Life*'s picture story creation process, which I will provide with my examination of the material created by Wolff.

Histories of Photography

Of the general histories of photography, Michel Frizot's *A New History of Photography* (1998)⁵, and Gisèle Freund's *Photography & Society* (1980)⁶ provide the most detailed account of *Life* magazine, but do not analyze picture stories individually or discuss much of the editing process. "Close Witness: The involvement of the Photojournalist,"⁷ from *A New History of Photography*, while mainly concerned with war photography, the rise of the German picture

⁵ Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

⁶ Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1980).

⁷ Fred Ritchin, "Close Witness: The involvement of the Photojournalist," in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998), 608.

magazines, and the social impact of major photographic events, does contain a small section relating (albeit briefly and vaguely) to the concerns of photo-editing. The author states that a photographer is the best editor, which is in stark opposition to long-time *Life* picture editor Wilson Hicks' opinions on the photographer's place in editing.⁸ Also in *A New History of Photography*, Thomas Michael Gunther's "The Spread of Photography" includes, along with the overview of photographic publishing history, a segment tracing, in brief, the path of photographs from assignment to publication, including a short paragraph on the role of freelance photographers such as Wolff. This provides a succinct outline of the process of photojournalism which is valuable to understanding the considerations of both photojournalists and magazine editors, but does not give concrete examples or discuss the specifics in the case of *Life* magazine.⁹ Freund mentions Hicks as being a sometimes-difficult manager, but only discusses his wrangling of photographers, as Hicks only gave assignments and did not select images for inclusion in the magazine. As with many other histories, *Photography and Society* espouses the rather romantic view of photojournalists as courageous, selfless risk-takers, without mentioning more mundane photojournalism.¹⁰

American Photojournalism: Motivations and Meanings (2009), by Claude Cookman, is a history of photojournalism in the United States and, because of its more focused look at photojournalism, provides more helpful information on the details of *Life*'s photographic output. Cookman notes that the magazine was run largely by a few editors who controlled

⁸ R. Smith Schunemeyer, *Photographic Communication: Principles, Problems and Challenges of Photojournalism* (New York: Hastings House, 1972), 359.

⁹ Thomas Michael Gunther, "The Spread of Photography: Commissions, Advertising, Publishing," in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998) 566.

¹⁰ Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1980), 145.

every aspect of the magazine's creation. He notes that most of the negatives and contact sheets were edited by Peggy Sargent and that a managing editor would be in charge of final image selection. Cookman also illuminates the different styles of managing editors and their art directors.¹¹ This look at the editorial hierarchy at the magazine makes it clear that *Life* was not the work of individual photographers or editors, but was authored by a complex web of contributors in the forms of photographers, writers, editors, and art directors.

Robert Lebeck and Bodo von Dewitz's *Kiosk: A History of Photojournalism* (2001)¹² and Mary Panzer's *Things as They Are* (2005)¹³ provide good models for showing the materiality of photojournalistic works. Both reproduce full spreads from magazines and newspapers rather than original prints without their context, but they still only give broad histories of the medium because they attempt to cover all of modern photojournalism. They do not explain the process of editing, or the materials of that process (negatives, contact sheets, etc.), both of which would have made them ideal models for the analysis of the Wolff archive.

Other specific history books address the history of Black Star, for whom Wolff worked. He gains a brief mention in *Truth Needs No Ally* (1994), by Howard Chapnick, head of Black Star, who discusses Wolff's personality and heaps praise on the photographer for his professional approach and technical skills. Chapnick's book does not give specific examples or show many photographs that Wolff took, but does give an idea of how he was perceived within the industry. Hendrick Neubauer's *Black Star: 60 years of photojournalism* (1997) provides an

¹¹ Claude Cookman, *American Photojournalism: Motivations and Meanings* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2009), 156-7.

¹² Robert Lebeck and Bodo von Dewitz, *Kiosk: A History of Photojournalism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

¹³ Mary Panzer, *Things as They Are: Photojournalism in Context Since 1955* (New York: Aperture, 2007).

outline of the history and business of Black Star, which includes multiple photographs taken by Wolff, but the text is mostly concerned with the agency's founding and the dealings of major photographers rather than the details of work such as Wolff's.

Memoirs from former *Life* editors give some information on the day-to-day running of the magazine. John G. Morris's *Get the Picture* (2002) and Loudon Wainwright's *The Great American Magazine* (1986)¹⁴ provide personal anecdotes of working as an editor at *Life*. They include some valuable information on who was performing what tasks at *Life*, and they recount some of the major issues dealt with by the staff. Most helpfully, these memoirs include segments discussing the lesser known aspects of *Life*, such as how departments were designated and how they interacted. While they point out the importance of the "back-of-the-book"¹⁵ departments, there is little analysis regarding how those departments worked. The memoirs rarely discuss individual photographs, mostly discussing the context and their memories of assignments in which they were involved.

Analytical books on *Life*, such as Erika Lee Doss's *Looking at Life Magazine* (2001) and Wendy Kozol's *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (1994), are concerned mostly with the social and political leanings of the magazine's editorial policy and the ramifications thereof. They provide little insight into who implemented these policies and at what times during production. A closer look into the intricacies of *Life* and its photographic essay is given in Glenn G. Willumson's *W. Eugene Smith and the Photographic Essay* (1992), but

¹⁴ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine: An Inside History of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

¹⁵ John Morris, *Get the Picture: A Personal History of Photojournalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22.

this text, while giving in-depth aesthetic and political analyses of photographic essays, only deals with the photo-essay, at the expense of the rest of the magazine.

The major history of photography texts largely pass over the specifics of the picture magazines to provide a broader overall history of the form. They also tend to pay more attention to the formation of magazines like *Life*, and their origins in the German picture magazines of the Weimar Republic.¹⁶ The histories provide context that outlines the rise and fall of *Life* and its rival publications, but what attention is given to the picture magazines generally deals with major photographers such as W. Eugene Smith and Margaret Bourke-White, and not the photographers who filled out the magazines of the time. Information about where Wolff's work exists in this timeline is helpful in understanding his place in the history of the medium, and the attention given to *Life* makes clear its importance.

Technical Texts

There are a number of textbooks and manuals meant to help prospective photojournalists and editors in learning their trades. Many of the textbooks provide much the same information, having a focus on the technical aspects of photojournalism, with sections devoted to the equipment used by both photographers and editors, and often with a segment on editing and selecting photographs.¹⁷ Two of these technical manuals are Arthur Rothstein's *Photojournalism: Pictures for magazines and newspapers* (1965) and *The Technique of the Picture Story*

¹⁶ For instance Tim Gidal's *Modern photojournalism: origin and evolution, 1910-1933*.

¹⁷ Other texts include Clifton Edom's *Photojournalism: Principles and Practices*, Frank P. Hoy's *Photojournalism: The Visual Approach*, Harold Evans' *Pictures on a Page: Photojournalism and Picture Editing* and Tom Ang's *Picture Editing*.

(1945) by Daniel Mich and Edwin Eberman. These two books provide an account of the production of a picture story from the perspective of the editorial staff at *Look* magazine. The authors of these books were editors at *Look*, one of *Life's* primary competitors. They provide a framework for how to discuss the creation of the stories that Wolff worked on, even though the methods of *Life* and *Look* varied slightly.

Two other texts which provide information on the workings of magazines and the relationships between photographers and editors are *Photographic Communication* (1972) edited by R. Smith Schuneman and *Words and Pictures* (1952) by Wilson Hicks. Hicks was a long-time picture editor for the magazine, and *Words and Pictures* outlines his philosophies about the way photographers and editors interact in the world of photojournalism. *Photographic Communication* is edited from a series of conferences on the topic of photojournalism, in part organized by Hicks; thus much of the volume consists of advice to people in that field. It contains discussions among editors on topics ranging from education of photographers to editorial relationships and art direction. While none of the discussions describes in detail the process of publishing a picture story by a photographer such as Wolff, the book contains many insights into the considerations of those working to produce such content.

Words and Pictures provides valuable information regarding the inner workings of a picture magazine. Specifically, Hicks points out that his role as picture editor at *Life* was only to procure photographs, while the managing editor was the one to choose all of the final images, crops and layouts for the magazine. During most of the time that Wolff received work from *Life*

that editor would have been Edward K. Thompson.¹⁸ Hicks also outlines the process by which a hypothetical picture story would be edited down and put into a layout for publication.¹⁹

These technical manuals and trade books show a 'best practices' version of photojournalism. They relate how photojournalism works in general and how it should be undertaken. Even when dealing directly with *Life* magazine, they generally shy away from detailed description of the editing process in favour of a discussion of the publication's philosophy regarding photojournalism. In conjunction with the lack of specifics in the histories of photography and photojournalism, these texts reveal a gap which a thorough dissection of the Werner Wolff Archive could hope to fill. Tracing a number of his assignments will help define the methods of freelance photographers working with *Life*, and the methods used by *Life's* editorial staff. These texts offer information on photojournalism in general and the history of *Life* in particular, but also demonstrate the need for this thesis, which will provide an in-depth analysis of the work of Werner Wolff.

¹⁸ Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures*, 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63-79.

Chapter 3: Illustration

Life is known primarily for its picture stories, but the magazine also published high quality writing, particularly in its “Articles” department which was, according to John G. Morris, one of two departments guaranteed space in each issue of the magazine.²⁰ As with every department, the amount of space in each issue dedicated to an “Article” would vary, with an item generally taking up between 4 and 8 spreads. In 1935, the year before *Life* was founded, future *Life* editors Daniel Longwell and Joseph Thorndike produced a pamphlet for *Time* which described a new sort of pictorial journalism which would become the hallmark of *Life*. The pamphlet described photography whose “purpose . . . is not to illustrate but to tell a complete story in itself,”²¹ but the “Articles” department in *Life* represented an older, more traditional type of magazine journalism, told with text rather than photography. The “Articles” section contained pieces of writing like Winston Churchill’s memoirs, features written by respected authors like John Dos Passos and James Agee, and profiles of people, businesses, or trends. Unlike the rest of the departments, the writer received a byline both in the table of contents and on the first page of the article.

The layouts of this department were also different from those of the rest of the magazine. There were often large blocks of text, sometimes without a single image, on a page. Other than a large photograph on the first spread, the images included in this part of the magazine were usually small and took up considerably less space than the text and the advertisements. Their size and rarity show that the images in this department were secondary

²⁰ John Morris, *Get the Picture*, 22.

²¹ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, 16.

to the words, and served only as illustration. There was often a portrait of the figure being profiled, or a photograph of a vehicle or building mentioned in the writing. The images themselves are not enough to tell a story, and thus only illustrate what is being written about.

Wolff's photographs appeared in nine articles for this department, which is between 7 and 8 percent of the pieces his photographs appeared in – more than any department other than "The Week's Events." Including stories in this same vein in other departments, fifteen of his 120 credits in *Life*, or 12.5 percent, were in this illustrative mode. Even with *Life*'s reputation for photographic primacy, it was common for Wolff's photographs to be published in *Life* in the service of other content.

Since the photographs were not the focus of these stories, these articles can provide examples of non-photographic pressures facing the editors who selected the photographs. The large blocks of text, coupled with a high volume of advertisements, meant that these layouts did not allocate much space for photographs. The small image size meant that the photographs weren't meant to drive the narrative on their own and so editors had to select simple, clear photographs that would also match the article in tone. The following examples help to explain how these particular pressures showed themselves in assignments shot by Werner Wolff.

Photographs in Service of Layout and Advertisements

One assignment for the "Articles" department that Wolff shot was a story about the producers of the board game Scrabble.²² The piece was published in the December 14, 1953 issue

²² "Little Business in the Country," *Life*, December 14, 1953, 100-112.

of *Life*. The story is printed on 6 pages across 7 spreads (one spread in the middle of the article is a full-spread watch advertisement). The first page has two columns of text on a background of a Scrabble board with the game's letter tiles spelling out the headline "Little Business in the Country." On the left of the spread is a colour advertisement for bourbon. The next spread has a narrow motor oil advertisement down the left side of the left page. The rest of that page is filled with the article: two small portrait photographs, each at the top of a column of text. The facing side is an advertisement for an electric shaver (Illustration 1). The next spread reverses this composition with a full page whiskey ad on the left, followed by two columns of article content, this time topped by an image and a chart showing how Scrabble is played. On the far right of the spread is a narrow advertisement for flashbulbs. The next spread continues the trend, with a half page ad for Bénédictine on the left sharing the page with a column of text containing a portrait. The right side of the spread is again taken up entirely by an advertisement, this time for pipe tobacco. The next spread mirrors this composition with a large beer advertisement across from a page split between text and an ad for shoe covers; this spread had no editorial photographs. The following pages are filled by a full spread advertisement for watches. The final spread of the article has the familiar composition of a page split vertically between advertisement and editorial content, this time with a photograph of the building in which Scrabble was produced. The facing page is filled by a colourful advertisement for socks. The photographs in this article were not the most important parts of these pages, as they take up the smallest space of any element, and are often overpowered by brightly coloured advertisements. The editorial images were dominated by both the blocks of copy and the advertisements: thus they were at the bottom of the visual hierarchy.

Wolff did, in fact, shoot the images, as there are large format negatives in the archive directly corresponding with the images in the article. The authorship for these images was given to the subject of the writing rather than to Wolff, which serves to show that the photographer's contributions to the article were not the primary concern: the photographer did not author this story, the writer and editors did.

The prevalence of advertisements in the article is not out of the ordinary for the magazine. In this particular issue, there were advertisements on 112 of the 170 pages. There were only 83 pages with editorial content on them, both photographs and text. In the stories driven by text, this means that there was even less room for photographs. The ads and particulars of the text-heavy layouts had a visible influence on the photographs chosen.

The portraits are fairly simple; they do not show the surroundings of their subjects or have a noticeable aesthetic. The photograph of the inventor of the game has him looking directly into the camera and holding his prototype board. In the other portraits, the producer of the game sits behind a large pile of the game's letter tiles, and the head engineer looks up from his drawing board. The small size of the printed photographs means that they have to be simple, with the subject clear against a plain background, without extraneous details or cluttered compositions. In order to put a face to the names in the story, the photographs had to crop out most of the body and environment of their subjects.

Interestingly, a photograph shot for this assignment was selected for the book *Life: The Second Decade 1946-1955*, published in 1984. The photograph shows the producer James Brunot sitting atop a large pile of Scrabble tiles²³. This photograph never appeared in the magazine, but was selected as being representative of photographs shot for the magazine in this ten-year span.

How is it that a photograph chosen for a volume publishing some of the best photographs of that decade was not included in the story for which it was shot? What makes one image a better photograph for an article, and the other a better photograph for that collection of images? The photographs of Brunot provide a perfect illustration of what choices are made by a magazine's editors in selecting images to publish. One photograph depicts a man sitting behind a table covered in



Illustration 2: Werner Wolff, "Portrait of James Brunot," 1953, digitally inverted gelatin silver negative, 6mm x 6mm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0797.007.



Illustration 3: Werner Wolff, "Portrait of James Brunot," 1953, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 21.59 x 27.94 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0797.333.

²³ Cornell Capa, Ralph Graves and Doris O'Neil, *Life: The Second Decade, 1946-1955*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1984), 169.

Scrabble tiles, with more tiles in his hands, looking straight ahead, directly into the camera (Illustration 2). It is straightforward, with a standard, horizontal perspective, showing the subject's face directly, while also displaying the items that he produces.

The other photograph shows the same man sitting cross-legged on a large pile of Scrabble tiles while holding the game board in his hands (Illustration 3). The camera is looking down on him from above as he looks up into it, removing the horizon from the view, creating a more disorienting perspective. The photograph places him on the floor in a much more playful, childlike position, reinforced by the bird's eye view. For a producer of a game, this seems like an apt and interesting environmental portrait. Why then was the other photograph included in the story?

The answer has to do with the size of the images when printed on the magazine page. The included portrait is cropped, taking out a larger field of Scrabble tiles which, when included, make Mr. Brunot again seem small and rather childlike behind them. If it was reproduced in its entirety in the page composition, the man's face would have been much smaller, and the image may not have been legible at all. When cropped, it is a much simpler, more easily readable portrait of a man from the chest up.

With the other image, this same treatment would have yielded a much different outcome. Again, had the entire frame been included, the man's face may have been too small to see. With this portrait, however, a closer crop would not work nearly as well. If cropped to the extent needed to make Brunot's face legible, his surroundings would be removed. The things that make the photograph interesting are the angle and the subject's environment, so if cropped to just include the man's face and upper body, it would be harder to understand exactly where

he was sitting, what he was doing, and why the camera was at such an angle. It loses its compositional strength and visual legibility, which makes it much less useful as an illustration to the written story. The layout, size, and technical limitations of the magazine meant that the simpler photograph was much better suited to this particular use.

This article is a perfect example of situations in which layouts, and their domination by advertisements, take precedence over photographs. This was an issue common to *Life* with its large volume of advertisements, and was even more pronounced in the “Articles” department, which was distinct for its preponderance of large blocks of text. The published story, as well as the archival material at the Ryerson Image Centre, show that the magazine’s editors’ main concern was in selecting the best, most legible frames for their specific layouts.

Photographs in Service of Written Content

The layouts were not the only non-photographic concern the editors had when selecting illustrative images. Because the text was the primary content, the photographs had to be chosen to match that content. Rather than the photograph driving the narrative with text only clarifying, these photographs had to support what was already written in the text.

One instance of this is another story in the “Articles” department to which Werner Wolff contributed, this time from a piece published on June 17, 1946 about existentialism in postwar Paris. The story is printed on five pages across five spreads, with a similar proportion of advertisement and editorial material as in the previously discussed story. Only four photographs and one drawing accompany the text. Most of the space is again dedicated to

advertisements, as most of the spreads contain only a half-page of editorial content. The first page alone deviates from this pattern, featuring a large photograph on its top half, and a smaller illustration below the headline and between two columns of text (Illustration 4).²⁴

This large, lead photograph is the only photograph taken by Wolff. The image is a portrait of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre with a serious look on his face, holding a book and standing in front of a window, through which can be seen

several bare trees. The other images in the article are three more portraits, and a photograph of the building where Sartre lived at the time.

As with the previously-discussed article, an image from this assignment which was not published in this story was later chosen to be a part of a book. This time, one of Wolff's portraits of Sartre was selected to be in Henrik Neubauer's *Black Star: 60 Years of Photojournalism* (1997).



Illustration 4: Bernard Frizell, "Existentialism," Photograph by Werner Wolff, drawing from Culver Service, Life, June 17, 1946, page 59.

²⁴ "Existentialism," *Life*, June 17, 1946, 58-66.

The portrait chosen shows Sartre, this time sitting in front of a wood-paneled wall, again holding a book, with a cigarette in his mouth, smoke dancing to the right of his head (Illustration 5). Sartre's expression in this portrait is much less serious than in the photograph published in *Life*, with a hint of a smile behind his cigarette. The ambiguous facial expression, the hazy cigarette smoke, and the



Illustration 5: Werner Wolff, "Portrait of Jean-Paul Sartre," 1946, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 12.7 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0689.02.

texture and pattern of the wood behind him certainly make for an intriguing portrait of the philosopher. The shot gained attention from the *Life* editors as well: on the contact sheet in the RIC's archive, there are several letters marked on that specific frame as well as crop marks.

The many letters and crop marks written in grease pencil on the contact sheet indicate that this particular frame was marked for printing and inclusion on multiple occasions by the members of the editorial staff: it received attention, but was ultimately left out of the article. This selection choice shows that the editorial staff was more concerned with the photograph matching the content of the text than with selecting a photograph that garnered more interest on the contact sheet.

Sartre's pleasant expression in the excluded photograph prevented its inclusion in the printed article. The text describes Sartre's existential philosophy, which was prevalent in Paris, as being rather depressing. The subhead says succinctly, "Amid Left-Bank revels, postwar Paris enthrones a bleak philosophy of pessimism derived by a French atheist from a Danish mystic."²⁵ The sombre tone is continued



Illustration 6: Werner Wolff, "Portrait of Jean-Paul Sartre," 1946, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 12.7 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0689.01.

throughout the article and is perfectly mirrored by the expression on Sartre's face in the photograph included with the piece (Illustration 6), and editors often looked for a particular mood or expression in an image.²⁶ He appears concerned and thoughtful, while in the photograph chosen by Neubauer, there is something genial, almost playful in his expression. In the magazine's chosen photograph, the background contains some ominous-looking trees with bare branches contrasting highly with the white sky and light-coloured landscape. This all made for a continuity of tone between the photograph and the text, and in a context where the photographs are only supporting the text, this was absolutely necessary.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, 243.

Wolff's photographs were flexible enough in style that the editorial staff could use them to accommodate different purposes. In the image they included, Sartre looks imposing, with barren trees behind him, high contrast between the sky and the interior, and a low angle to make him loom over the camera. Wolff also gave them the more traditional author's portrait, with Sartre smiling with a cigarette, and a higher camera angle. These photographs show Wolff's skill at providing varied content, as the two images provided very different lighting challenges. In one, Sartre was backlit by the bright sky outside the window, so Wolff had to balance that with his own lights, while the other involved more traditional portrait lighting. Wolff's abilities allowed for the editors to choose from a number of portrayals, each professionally produced, using lighting, angle, and posing to make portraits that could support disparate articles about Sartre.

In both stories which Wolff's photographs helped illustrate, there were many issues outside of the photographs themselves which caused the editorial staff to choose one portrait over another. Whether it is a page layout, number of ads, or the tone of the article, the selection of photographs in *Life* was dependent upon much more than photographic excellence. In cases such as this, Wolff was able to produce technically sound photographs of varying complexity, with different portrayals of their subjects, allowing the editors to choose an image that best served their editorial tone or accommodated their space limitations.

Chapter 4: Solo Work

While Wolff's work was often used in the service of other content, *Life* did employ the photographer to create entire picture stories. On twenty different occasions, or one sixth of his 120 assignments, Wolff's photographs were the only major images in an image-based article. Additionally, there are other articles, largely carried by Wolff's work, but with one or two illustrations or other graphic accompaniments. These could be long picture stories like those for which *Life* is known, or short news items, sometimes made up of just a single image. His photographs were able to tell complete stories, and the magazine used him to these ends throughout his career.

Though the subject matter that Wolff shot was often trivial, his professional manner meant that he could provide the editors of the magazine with photographs that fulfilled their technical needs. His treatment of all aspects of a shot, whether lighting, framing, or camera angle, was just as considered no matter the significance of the subject. His photographs allowed the editors to form the narrative they wanted from even the most mundane of subjects. Wolff did this by using the common, invisible aesthetic of the magazine, which meant that the editors could seamlessly weave the more banal stories into the magazine's pages without a jarring change in aesthetic between subjects. Wolff regularly provided photographs which both helped fill *Life* with trivial content and maintained the high technical standards of the magazine's photography.

Trivial Subject Matter

Writing of editor Edward K. Thompson, Loudon Wainwright said, “[Thompson] encouraged the ardent pursuit of the more trivial (and very popular content) of *Life* – the pretty-girl stories, stories about fads and fashions, stories about parlor games and pet elephants.”²⁷ Oddities of this sort are exactly what Wolff was often asked to shoot for the magazine. He completed an assignment profiling a turtle soup manufacturer in 1947, and a story about dolls in 1953. Wolff shot one such assignment about “the world’s first fish track”²⁸ opening in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Titled “Goldfish Sweepstakes” and published in *Life* in the August 23, 1948 issue, the picture story takes up a single spread, and contains two photographs, one above the



Illustration 7: “Goldfish Sweepstakes,” Two photographs by Werner Wolff, *Life*, August 23, 1948, page 90-91.

²⁷ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, 177.

²⁸ “Goldfish Sweepstakes,” *Life*, August 23, 1948, 90-91.

other, both straddling the gutter, and each with a caption (Illustration 7). Between the two photographs is the headline and the single, small block of copy. The top photograph shows a crowd watching on as the racing goldfish near the finish line. The game has a dark border with fishes and sea horses painted on it around the tubes containing the fish. The tightly packed crowd is lit with a bright light from the right side of the camera, creating highlights and dramatic shadows throughout the crowd as they peer around each other to try to see the race. The bottom photograph is a close-up of three of the fish and their mechanical sharks in the tubes. The photograph is very high contrast with the dark, backlit fish and sharks standing out starkly against the white of the tubes, which are, in turn, on a black background, and run parallel to each other, creating a graphic effect, highlighting the diagonal arrangement of the fish and sharks in the left side of the image.

The text explains that the race is a carnival-type game, with 12 clear 20-foot tubes filled with water, each of which contained a live goldfish and a mechanical shark. Players would move the shark with control sticks and try to scare their fish over the finish line first. It is a simply laid-out story about a minor curiosity, but as Wainwright noted, these trivialities were encouraged by editors and enjoyed by readers of the magazine.

This story, like most in *Life*, was meant to be told through its imagery. With only two photographs on a single spread, this must be done with considerable economy. The first photograph sets the scene, showing the crowd struggling to see what is happening, and that this is a popular event, while the second photograph demonstrates what exactly is happening, and how it works, revealing the mechanical sharks chasing the fish through the clear tubes. The parallel lines in both photographs tie the story together visually and make it clear to the reader

that the second photograph is a close-up of the game. In just two photographs, the article demonstrates that a carnival game is popular and involves fish racing through tubes while chased by mechanical sharks.

From Wolff's contact sheets, it appears he was tasked with showing both the crowd and how the game worked. There are many different angles from which he shot the crowd. In some shots he tried to get closer to the game, while including part of the crowd. In others he stood directly in front of or just to the side of the tubes and shot out at the crowd, featuring the brightly lit faces of the people playing the game (Illustration 9). These different views of the crowd gave the editorial staff options in how they wanted to display the game. If they had felt that the game needed to be clearer, they could have used one of the closer crowd views. If they had wanted to highlight the enjoyment of the players they could have selected one of the



Illustration 8: Werner Wolff, "Crowd at carnival game," 1948, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0524.175.

photographs of their ecstatic faces as they played. In the end they chose the photograph that showed the size of the crowd, and the context for the game (Illustration 8).

The second thing that needed to be demonstrated was how the game worked. Wolff was no less thorough in his coverage of this aspect of the story. There are several contact sheets full of photographs taken of the fishes in their tracks (Illustration 10). They are taken from many different angles: straight on, from the side, close-up, and from farther back. There are close-ups of the fishes behind their starting gates, with the sharks just behind them. There are photographs taken from behind the tubes, showing the mechanical parts which operate the game, some of which feature a man performing maintenance on the game. All of these demonstrate how the game worked in slightly different ways.

Wolff provided the editors with a variety of options, which was especially valuable, given the limited space given to such a minor subject. Each photograph and article had to make it through multiple levels of editors, so a higher quality and larger variety of photographs allowed the magazine to make sure it gets a printable story. When his images were printed onto contact sheets, film editor Peggy Sargent or one of her staff members



Illustration 9: Werner Wolff, "Players of carnival game," 1948, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0524.175.

went over every frame, and selected the most suitable to be enlarged for other editors to look at.²⁹ From there, story and department editors might look at and select photographs, and once the art department laid out the story with the final image choices, the managing editor had the final say regarding what went in to the magazine. There were a lot of different people to please, but Wolff's photographs provided the editorial staff with the visual content they needed to fill their magazine. Wolff's workmanlike attitude and technical skills allowed him to provide all the necessary points of view for these different emphases, and meant that each shot was legible, even in the dark environment of the carnival.

When assigned trivial subject matter, Wolff performed very reliably in fulfilling his assignments. This attitude toward his work was reflective of his general professionalism. Howard Chapnick described his honesty when out on assignment, saying, "I never met a more

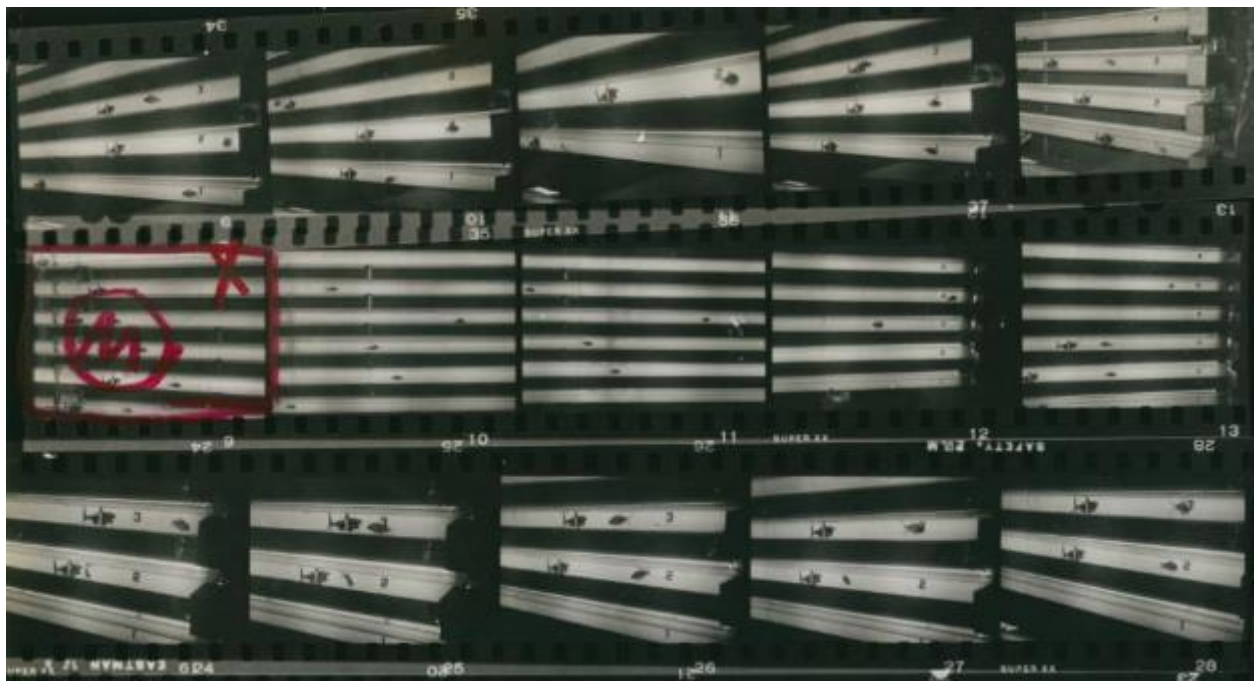


Illustration 10: Werner Wolff, "Carnival game," 1948, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0524.183.

²⁹ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, 242.

scrupulous photographer where a client's money was concerned."³⁰ Wolff took his clients' needs seriously and provided *Life* with the content they required, regardless of subject matter.

Technical Ability

The stories which Wolff shot in completion can also reveal his technical skills as a photographer. Chapnick said that "Wolff was indeed the perfect technician with a well-ordered sense of composition. . . I can never remember him doing an assignment that did not meet critical standards."³¹ These technical skills are a major part of what kept Wolff's photographs in *Life* magazine even though he was never on staff.

Wolff provided every photograph for a story titled "Science Squares the Egg" which was published in the Science department of the April 30, 1956 issue of *Life*. The article showcased a new method of egg packaging which involved cracking the eggs into an ice cube tray-like plastic container and sealing it with plastic film. The magazine depicts the manufacture and benefits of the new method, which was developed by a professor at Cornell University's New York State College of Agriculture.³²

The story is printed on 3 pages over 3 spreads and contains 8 photographs taken by Werner Wolff. The opening page is on the right of the spread and features a large photograph of a package of eggs, as well as a smaller photograph of a woman's hands opening an egg into a

³⁰ Howard Chapnick, *Truth Needs No Ally*, 161.

³¹ Howard Chapnick, *Truth Needs No Ally*, 161.

³² "Science Squares the Egg," *Life*, April 30, 1956, 105-108.

skillet. The next page has three photographs down its right side, toward the centre of the spread. The photographs show the eggs being sealed and some of the benefits of the new, plastic packaging. The third and final spread of the story has the same layout of three photographs down the right side of the left page, two demonstrating the durability of the eggs and the third showing taste-testers at work on the eggs. This is a typical story from the smaller, back-of-book departments: there are many ads, and the subject is more trivial than most.

The individual photographs in this piece are typical of Wolff's work in that they highlight their subject rather than the photograph itself. The large image on the first page features a dozen eggs in the new plastic packaging, backlit to demonstrate the transparency of the new shells, which is a feature noted in the text of the story (Illustration 11). In the other shot on the page, a woman is opening an egg into a skillet, exhibiting the ease of using the plastic "shells". This close-up contains only the information necessary to understand the benefit of the product; it shows a woman's hands, the egg, and the skillet in a straightforward manner. As Erika Doss notes of many of *Life's* photographers, Wolff hid his camera, making "looking at pictures . . . a naturalized occurrence and . . . helping to define photo-vision as visual truth."³³ When readers



Illustration 11: Werner Wolff, "Plastic egg packaging," 1956, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0773.272.

³³ Erika Doss, *Looking at Life*, 16.

This style is maintained throughout the story; the second page of the article has three more photographs demonstrating how the eggs are packaged and used (Illustration 12). First the eggs are shown being sealed into their new packages, then an egg is pictured being





Illustration 13: "Science Squares the Egg," Two photographs by Werner Wolff, *Life*, April 30, 1956, page 108.

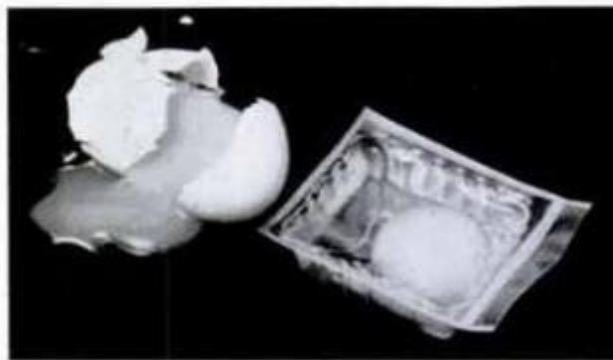


Illustration 14: Werner Wolff, "Woman separating eggs," 1956, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0773.274.



separated, and finally, eggs are photographed being lifted from a pot

of water after being boiled in their new plastic shells. Each of these tasks is shown in close-up, being performed by anonymous people whose faces (and most of their bodies) are out of frame. The last page of the story has three photographs, two of which depict a comparison of a normal egg and a new plastic-shelled egg being dropped. The first image shows Professor Lawrence Darrah dropping the two eggs, and the second is a close-up of the results (Illustration 13); these two photographs represent a direct cause and effect, elegantly displaying all the information needed to understand that the new plastic casing is much more durable than an eggshell in two

dense, high-contrast images. The final photograph of the page and the story is a group of taste-testers, the nearest of whom is smelling an egg on a plate, making it very clear that the eggs are being tested.

In the included photographs and the contact sheets in the archive, the technical skills Chapnick described in Wolff are easily apparent. Wolff's lighting and compositional talents were necessary in order to maintain the transparent aesthetic and make the product look innovative and attractive to the readers. The photograph of a dozen eggs that opens the story is a perfect example of this. Wolff backlit the eggs in order to highlight their transparency, which is a major part of the appeal of the new packaging. The article points out that the eggs will no longer have to be candled to judge their quality. His lighting choice made the benefits of this new packaging evident from the very first image.

On more than one occasion Wolff froze movement with his camera in order to show action. The contact sheets reveal that he shot many frames in rapid succession of the woman separating an egg, each of them perfectly exposed (Illustration 14). The frames show the slow drip of an egg white, shining brightly in contrast to the dark grey background. The background is cropped out of the photograph in the magazine, but the contact sheets reveal that Wolff used the dark edge of the cabinet to frame the subject.

Wolff also stopped the action on the photograph of Darrah dropping the two eggs. In the magazine, the professor's dark suit disappears on the black background, but the contact sheets show a tremendous amount of tonal subtlety. The subject is lit from above with very diffuse light, creating very soft shadows in his face, and enough tonal range in his suit jacket to

Illustration 15: Werner Wolf, "Professor Darrah dropping eggs," 1956, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0773.270.



separate him from the dark background, all while keeping everything in focus with only the slightest hint of motion blur (Illustration 15).

Although the magazine's printing did not do justice to the tonal range of the photograph, it does not take away from the composition of the shot. The bright white of the eggs falling stands out starkly against his black suit, and the white of his shirt creates an arrow pointing straight down in the direction of the movement. The reader follows the gaze of the professor and the shape of his shirt in the direction of the falling eggs. The layout in the magazine takes advantage of this composition by placing the photograph of the eggs after they landed directly below the photograph of the drop, with very little gap between them.

Wolff had a photographic skill set which allowed him to photograph any subject for *Life* in a way that made it look good. He used 35mm, medium format, and large format film with equal skill depending on what he was shooting. Through his lighting and compositions, Wolff allowed the *Life* editors to create a consistent, visually appealing world for the readers. The subjects he shot were not the most noble to appear in *Life*, but they were typical for the magazine. Wolff's talents as a photographer and the professionalism he brought to any assignment meant that even the most trivial stories maintained the quality expected of the prestigious magazine. These qualities were especially important to a magazine like *Life* in which widely disparate subjects were covered every week. With photographers like Wolff, the editors could create a magazine which included both hard news and popular trivialities while maintaining a stylistic consistency.

Chapter 5: Multi-Photographer Picture Stories

A vast majority of Wolff's contributions to *Life* were to picture stories that involved multiple photographers or artists. Eighty-four of his 120 published assignments, or 70% of the stories his photographs appeared in, were in this category. Wolff was often called upon by the magazine to contribute to news items in and around New York, where he was based.³⁴ These stories saw his photographs used to illustrate national news events, architectural trends, or profiles of musicians.

In 1937, early in the magazine's run, *Life* printed an advertisement for its own content titled, "The Camera as Essayist," which outlined how the editors saw its picture stories. It describes the camera as more than a reporter, but rather an essayist. The advertisement says that each "photographer has his style as an essayist has his." It paints the ideal picture story as being singular, the vision of one photographer.³⁵ This ideal was rarely achieved even in the vaunted "Photographic Essay" department; in many other areas of the magazine, this standard was nearly unattainable and so was seldom upheld.

As John G. Morris said, the editors had to "fill the book" every week.³⁶ This meant that they needed large quantities of content in a short amount of time. This meant often employing agency photographers like Wolff, buying photographs individually from wire services and agencies, and also purchasing images from occasional freelance contributors, known as

³⁴ Sara Manco, "Finding Wolff," 25.

³⁵ Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 44.

³⁶ John G. Morris, *Get the Picture*, 22.

stringers. *Life's* large demand for photographic content necessitated special arrangements with the large agencies; the magazine had exclusive American rights to Associated Press photographs,³⁷ and at one point also provided Black Star with between thirty and forty percent of its business.³⁸ These outside sources of photographs could provide entire stories, but in the case of Werner Wolff, it was often just one or two images used to help complete an article by filling in gaps in coverage, or by providing a particularly good photograph for a news item. Access to this broad range of sources was essential for *Life* to generate content quickly, especially in terms of news coverage.

"The Week's Events" was, by its nature, a department that would have found great difficulty in trying to consistently produce picture stories which had a single photographer's voice. It was one of two magazine departments, along with the previously discussed "Articles" section, which was guaranteed space in each week's issue.³⁹ The section covered both foreign and domestic news and gave the highlights of the past week's major events. This news coverage generally took up the first half of the magazine, and major news items were often printed without the copious amounts of advertisements found in the departments toward the back of the magazine, as described in previous chapters. "The Week's Events" department also provided Wolff with the largest portion of his work for *Life*. His photographs appeared in forty-one different picture stories in the department — over one third of the 120 articles in which his photographs were printed. These assignments showcase important aspects of Wolff's work for

³⁷ Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, 34.

³⁸ Marianne Fulton, *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1988), 138.

³⁹ John G. Morris, *Get the Picture*, 22.

Life and the magazine's methods of news coverage and content creation, namely, what types of gaps in coverage Wolff filled, and the aesthetic that tied together *Life*'s picture stories.

Filling Gaps in News Coverage

Wolff contributed to a large segment in the October 18, 1948 issue of the magazine which details the various campaigns leading up to the November elections in that year. The election coverage takes up twelve pages, without interruption from advertisements. It dedicates space to gubernatorial races, Congressional campaigns, the presidential race, and third party candidates. A single photograph taken by Werner Wolff was included on the spread showing the third party presidential candidates. He photographed perennial Socialist party candidate Norman Thomas campaigning in the greater New York City area, with the picture that was included taken in Bridgeport, Connecticut (Illustration 16).⁴⁰

Wolff's photograph nearly fills the right page of the spread, with only a small caption below it. The image shows Thomas standing on a small platform in front of an industrial building with a small group of people watching him speak and two clotheslines with white sheets of fabric hanging above the audience. Thomas is on the right side of the frame, looking toward the center of the photograph and the rest of the spread. The facing page has two photographs, one above the other, and each with a caption. Between the two photographs is a headline and block of copy describing the varying levels of hopelessness of the third party

⁴⁰ "The Third Parties," *Life*, October 18, 1948, 40-42.

candidates in the presidential election, which Republican Thomas E. Dewey was expected to win with ease.

The photographs maintain the tone of the copy, in that they are not particularly flattering to their subjects once combined with a headline and subheading that read “The Third Parties: All they can get is the exercise.” The top image shows Progressive party candidate Henry Wallace in a crowd, holding aloft a large squash, upon which is inscribed “Wallace for President.” The lower image depicts Dixiecrat nominee Strom Thurmond addressing an unseen audience in the presence of a couple of bored-looking children and a large curtain of tobacco leaves. Wolff’s photograph shows Norman Thomas speaking to what appears to be an audience of no more than a dozen people in a dingy industrial area with laundry hanging above.



Illustration 16: “The Third Parties,” Three photographs, Jon Brenneis, Anthony Linck, and Werner Wolff, Life, October 18, 1948, page 40-41

The other candidates, both in the presidential race and in the other races, were campaigning all around the country. This meant that to report on the entirety of the campaign, the editors needed image sources throughout the United States. On the spread which included Wolff's work, the three photographs were taken in California, Maryland, and Connecticut. The geographical range involved meant that this story had to be filled out by both staff and agency photographers.

When news events were spread out like this, across the country or over a long time period, the editors of *Life* often employed many different photographers. In the case of this issue's election coverage, eighteen different sources were used to provide the twenty-nine photographs of races in every region of the country. These sources included five agencies, three of which gave no personal credit to a photographer. The other photographs in the third party candidates section were taken by California-based photographer Jon Brenneis, of the Cal-Pictures agency, and *Life* staff photographer Anthony Linck.

Wolff filled a gap in the coverage of a relatively minor element of the election, photographing a third party candidate who was never likely to win an election, but it was a part of the election that *Life* felt was important enough to publish. The only other photographs in the election coverage taken in the New York City metropolitan area are of the presidential elections: one taken by staff photographer Francis Miller, and two purchased from the Acme wire service. The need to cover so much within a short time stretched *Life*'s photographers thin, with Miller providing a photograph of Republican presidential hopeful Dewey in New York City, as well as two photographs from congressional races in Kentucky. With many of their staff

photographers spread around the country shooting key elections, *Life* used Wolff, other freelancers, and the agencies to fill in the gaps.

Shared Aesthetic

In order for the *Life* editors to piece together a coherent picture story from several different image sources, the photographs needed to share a visual aesthetic. Scholar Erika Doss has defined this shared pictorial style as appearing to have a “straightforward sensibility and simple didacticism.”⁴¹ The photographs look simple, but convey meaning, sometimes glamorizing, sometimes denigrating their subjects. The article about the election does both, with Wolff’s images of the third party candidates painting them as outsiders in the political process.

Wolff’s contact sheets from his campaign coverage reveal that Thomas was speaking to a much larger crowd than it seemed in the photograph that was published, and he spoke to even larger audiences in other locations. The image included maintains the tone of the other photographs in the spread, and also creates a closed composition on the spread. In the photograph, Thomas has his back to the edge of the page, while the lines of white fabric also lead the reader’s eye from Thomas into the centre of the spread. It fits the editors’ needs both editorially and compositionally.

Some of the other photographs Wolff took of Thomas have more in common with the positive portrayals of politicians in the magazine’s campaign coverage. Wolff shows Thomas shaking hands with people, speaking to large crowds, and standing in front of a large

⁴¹ Erika Doss, *Looking at Life*, 16.



Illustration 17: Werner Wolff, "Norman Thomas campaigning," 1948, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0830.084.

impressive building, all things that gubernatorial and Congressional candidates are photographed doing (Illustration 17). He is usually above his audience, at the edge of the frame looking toward the centre of the photograph at his audience. He is often framed by either audience members or architectural features, creating the same closed compositions as many of the other photographs included, both in the campaign coverage and the magazine in general. These photographs also share similar lighting, as many of them are shot either under direct sunlight, or under lights at an indoor speech. This shared aesthetic gave the editors the ability to create the narrative they wanted on the spread.

Had the editors of the magazine wished, they could have told a much different story about Norman Thomas. By changing the headline, or the photographs around it, even the very same image could have been utilized for a much different outcome. Wolff gave the magazine photographs that had a blank aesthetic, uninformed by personal or political involvement. He gave the editors content which allowed them to combine photographs at will, because his images highlighted the content rather than the photograph itself. Photographs sharing closed

composition, high contrast, and simple lighting made for easily legible images that could be used to piece together stories.

Wolff contributed photographs which further demonstrate this aesthetic for an item titled “The Great Train Strike,” which was published in the June 3, 1946 issue of *Life*. It describes a large labour strike by the two largest train workers’ unions. This was part of a wave of labour strikes in America after World War II. The story is spread over six consecutive pages, in which Wolff contributed two photographs, both of them on the first page (Illustration 18).⁴² The large



image at the top of the page shows a large crowd of would-be commuters in Grand Central Station. They are guarded by four police officers as they stand under an archway, behind a rope. Below the photograph is the headline and two blocks of copy, between which lies a second, smaller photograph. This smaller photograph shows the stationmaster writing a notice on a chalkboard saying that all train

Illustration 18: “The Great Train Strike,” Two photographs by Werner Wolff, *Life*, June 3, 1946, page 27.

⁴² “The Great Train Strike,” *Life*, June 3, 1946, 27-32.

service is suspended until further notice.

The rest of the story goes on to contain many photographs of stranded travellers and cargo, idle railroad workers, and immobile trains. The text describes the American populace as being unhappy with organized labour, in typical anti-union fashion for the magazine, which went as far as to publish an anti-labour and anti-New Deal letter from a reader at the end of the article.



Illustration 19: Werner Wolff, "Crowd at Grand Central Station," 1946, detail of gelatin silver contact sheet, 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection of the Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, © The Family of Werner Wolff. AG02.2009.0822.187.

The large photograph in particular shows the closed frame which was important to *Life's* story formation (Illustration 19). The crowd being held back by a rope and the police are nicely framed by a bright, white archway, which gives the impression of completeness – nothing seems left out, allowing the reader to feel as though they are looking through the page as if it were a window. It makes the world of the photograph finite and therefore controllable by the editors of the magazine. In this and most other photographs in *Life* in this time period, there are no major forms or figures cropped awkwardly or abruptly. With clean, simple compositions, the photographs can give the illusion of including all relevant information regarding their

subjects. The completeness of the image is what creates the “straightforward sensibility and simple didacticism”⁴³ that Doss describes as being central to the magazine’s aesthetic.

With the crowd in the rail station or Norman Thomas speaking, the editorial staff can mold the message of the photograph because its composition implies an easily understandable completeness. The material in the Ryerson Image Centre shows that this was not the case; what was published in the election coverage was not the entire story. When the photograph is invisible, when the reader sees the subject not the medium, *Life* is able to have an editorial voice without being overtly didactic. By placing photographs alongside each other, or headlines, the editors could gently, quietly lead the reader to their intended conclusion.

The two examples given are a part of the largest portion of Wolff’s *Life* output; he provided a great many other photographs for these multi-photographer picture stories. For its photographic essays *Life* claimed an ideal of photography as the voice of a singular photographic author, but it also had to fill a magazine each week with high-quality photographs. In order to do that, many sources of photographs and other content were needed. This shifted the authorial voice to the editorial staff, who used the content provided by Wolff as individual components, combined with headlines and captions in ways that gave the photographs the meaning that the editors wanted. When the photograph, rather than the photographic essay, is the base unit for a magazine, the shared, invisible aesthetic of the photographs allows the coherence of a magazine built from disparate sources.

⁴³ Erika Doss, *Looking at Life*, 16.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout his career Wolff's photographs were published in many contexts in *Life* magazine. He took photographs in support of written pieces, he created entire picture stories, and he provided visual content to augment or be augmented by other photographers. These images were generally for stories over which he held little authorship. He molded his photography to suit the needs of the magazine, and had little personal involvement in the subjects of his assignments. His photographs had a blank aesthetic, and were often not the main content of a given article.

These qualities can explain why Werner Wolff has not been a particularly recognized photographer within the history of photojournalism. While he covered World War II, he did not continue to chase conflicts around the globe like Robert Capa, and he did not become intensely involved in the cause of his subjects like W. Eugene Smith. Wolff's photographs did not have a recognizable and unique aesthetic like Gordon Parks or Henri Cartier-Bresson. These same qualities which make him distinct from the most famous photojournalists and documentary photographers greatly contributed to his having had a long and successful career as a photojournalist.

Wolff's work was often used in support of non-photographic content, such as the writing in the "Articles" department. Even when his photographs were not the primary content, Wolff worked professionally, providing thorough, technically sound coverage of any subject, to serve the text. Howard Chapnick notes that one *Life* editor described Wolff as "the only

photographer [he] ever knew who was not temperamental.”⁴⁴ Wolff’s photography was a job, and as an agency photographer he provided visual content for many clients, both news outlets and corporate clients, without having control over their final use. There is generally a degree of nobility afforded photographers who take a deep personal interest in their subjects. For instance W. Eugene Smith spent long periods of time shooting each assignment, becoming consumed with his mammoth Pittsburgh project⁴⁵ and being closely involved with his subjects in shooting the effects of Minamata disease.⁴⁶ Wolff, on the other hand, had a workmanlike professionalism, filling in gaps in coverage without ego on whichever assignment he was given without trying to make a personal statement. This willingness to create work in service of a magazine’s writing and editorial content contributed to the amount of work provided to him by *Life*, and is the reason that the history of photojournalism has forgotten him.

Another major factor in Wolff having had so much of his photography published in *Life* was his aesthetic, which is difficult to describe because, as demonstrated, his photographs were primarily descriptive and demonstrative, depicting their subject without the intervention of any obvious personal style. As Chapnick said, “His camera was a communicative tool that spoke directly to the viewer without nuance or ambiguity.” His photographs allow themselves to be transparent, letting the reader see the subject without having to decipher a poetic vision. This manifested itself as simple compositions with closed forms. His photographs give the illusion that there is nothing hidden beyond the frame of the image. All the necessary information is

⁴⁴ Howard Chapnick, *Truth Needs No Ally*, 161.

⁴⁵ John G. Morris, *Get the Picture*, 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

squarely in the frame, with forms often leading inward rather than hinting at things outside the frame, or giving a fractured, incomplete view of the subject.

Wolff's professional qualities were perfect for *Life* magazine, where for most of the content, authorship lay not with the photographers, but with the editorial staff. The staff chose individual frames, cropped them and arranged them into stories to fit their concept. Even in stories where a single photographer provided every image, an editor had to approve each frame and each arrangement. Wolff's reliability and aesthetic made him a useful team player in *Life's* magazine-building apparatus. These qualities were underlined by the quality of his work: Wolff's photographs are well-lit and properly framed, he shot in all formats from 35mm to 4x5 sheet film, and he could provide formal portraits of public figures, carefully composed still lifes, or candid photographs of crowds, all with proper lighting and exposure.

The editors at *Life* knew that Wolff would provide them with the content that they required for any assignment given. His photographs would cover any topic needed, and their aesthetic was easy to match with the rest of the content in the magazine, giving him a great versatility. He was a different kind of photojournalist from those discussed as major figures in photojournalism, but he may have been more typical in many ways of the photographers who worked consistently, filling the pages of *Life* and other picture magazines.

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