

ROBERT CAPA:

'The Man Who Invented Himself'

An important biography of a major photojournalist
raises questions about truth in packaging

By Jim Hughes

Robert Capa, Richard Whelan's important and troubling biography of the man once known as "the world's greatest war photographer," has already received a first wave of critical praise, been excerpted in *American Photographer*, and optioned as a television miniseries—all of which, I might add, is well-deserved.

The publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, has wisely chosen to publish two books: the biography, normally dimensioned for easy reading; and a larger companion volume, *Robert Capa Photographs*, a monograph edited by Whelan and Robert's brother, Cornell Capa, and superbly reproduced by Rapoport Press.

The two books can be purchased separately or as a package. Buy both volumes; even at the full retail price of a nickel less than \$55, they're a bargain. I have spent more in some Manhattan bistros for a single evening of heartburn, and here I received a full week's worth of reliving in my imagination the life of a major figure in photography's short and still relatively undocumented history.

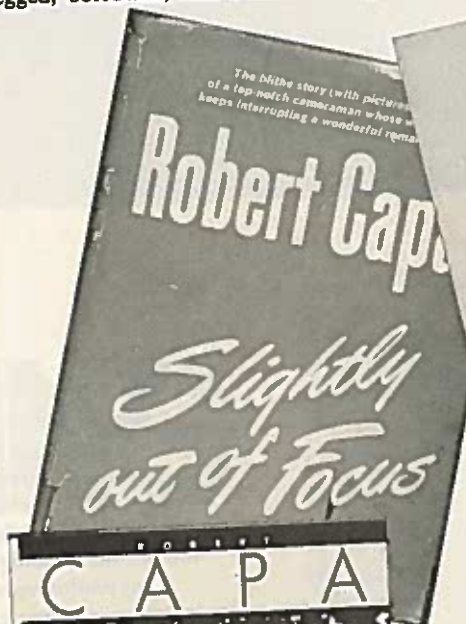
Whelan, an art historian whose previous credits include the excellent *Double Take: A Comparative Look at Photographs*, has written an intelligent book in a spare style unencumbered by the usual excesses of emotional attachment to his subject. The dissimilar seeds of the author's fascinating thesis are planted on page one, and rigorously nurtured until the wild hybrid "Bob Capa" was destined to become met his inevitable and violent end on page 299, where Whelan vividly describes Capa's stepping on a land mine in 1954 while photographing hostilities in French Indochina.

Endre Friedmann was born in 1913 in Budapest, a Hungarian city straddling the Danube that suffered from what Whelan terms a "split personality." Buda was wealth, aristocracy, and fairy-tale castles, while Pest, a seat of both commerce and art, was the bourgeoisie intent on appearing to be rich. Endre grew up in Pest and aspired to Buda. Before long, Endre, known by the nickname "Bandi," found himself in Paris, where he spelled his name "Andre," and eventually in-

vented an "American" alter ego named "Robert Capa," a thoroughly charming character whose life, in the hands of Whelan, a meticulous historian, reads like a detailed outline for an adventure novel built around the precipitous events of our century.

"Outwardly, at least," the author writes on page 279 about his world-traveling subject, "the boy of Pest had become a man of Buda." By then, Capa had begged, borrowed, and stolen his way

through a number of impoverished years, had photographed three wars, and had innumerable romantic entanglements—including one highly publicized affair with Ingrid Bergman and another, more-intense relationship that ended in the tragic death of his one true love, Gerda Taro, a fellow war photographer who early on had played a crucial role in his self-invention. To his eternal credit, Capa also



conceived and helped start Magnum, the legendary cooperative photo agency.

Robert Capa's life was itself enveloped in legends, mostly of his own making, and Whelan goes to great lengths—indeed, it seems to be the central thrust of his book—to separate fact from fiction. In the first 95 pages alone, which follow the photographer to 1935, Whelan cites some half-dozen instances of Capa's having told or written stories about himself that were at variance—often great variance—with the truth.

In one particularly telling example, the author describes how Capa, then still confined within his earlier persona, photographed a parachute jump, no small accomplishment in the 1930s. "Andre told

his friends that he had jumped—and, indeed his reportage was cleverly constructed to make it look as though he had—but he actually shot his story without jumping or even going up in a plane.”

But after proving beyond question Capa's essential unreliability with the facts, Whelan himself seems to fall victim to his subject's yarn-spinning skills. On page 100 begins the story of a photograph made in 1936 that through the years has taken on a life of its own. The picture shows a Spanish Loyalist soldier falling, arms thrown back, purportedly at the moment of death from the bullet fired by a fellow Spaniard who happened to be of a different political persuasion. The picture was published in *Vu* and *Regards* in 1936, *Life* in 1937, and for many around the world, became—and is still—a potent symbol of war. From this one picture grew Capa's early fame.

Of late, the picture has also become the subject of considerable controversy. In

sual evidence: a second picture from the same sequence, of an entirely different soldier falling in precisely the same spot, at virtually the same moment, as the “dead” soldier. “We may well then ask,” Whelan writes the following: “why it is that although the two men fell within a short time of each other (the cloud configurations are almost identical) in neither picture do we see the body of the other man on the ground.”

Whelan refers to, but does not relate, other, still different stories about the event. One that I have heard—from a source I consider reliable—has Capa admitting to photographing a band of militiamen horsing around, as one after the other ran over the crest of a hill and, at a

vinced this reader that Capa's consummate skills as a storyteller were blended with a cavalier attitude toward the facts and dates of his photographs. For Whelan to withhold the logical conclusion of his own irrefutable argument was, I must admit, a shock to my system. Symbolic implications aside, Robert Capa presented himself to the world as a journalist, and I have every right to know whether the image long considered photography's truest evidence of man's inhumanity to man was, in fact, a fiction. It would be as if our alphabet suddenly had lost the letter “w”. The language—and photography is a language—would be forever altered.

Whelan's treatment of Capa's second most famous photograph—the gritty picture of a helmeted soldier pushing

Robert Capa



Photographs



Death
in the Making

BY ROBERT CAPA

TRANSLATED BY DONALD CAPA AND GEORGE

CAPTION BY ROBERT CAPA, TRANSLATED BY JAY

PREVIERI BY JAY WALKER, APPROPRIATED BY UNDER 30

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his 1975 book, *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightly, quoting various sources—each with a different story—cast a pall of doubt over the authenticity of this, Capa's single most famous photograph. He offered scenarios that ranged from journalist O'Dowd Gallagher's claim that the picture was shot not in battle but on a training maneuver, to writer John Hersey's image of Capa crouching in a trench, arms over his head, tripping his shutter blindly at the sound of machine-gun fire (as related in Hersey's 1947 article, “The Man Who Invented Himself”). Both stories seem to have begun with Capa himself. Knightly's least likely tale has somebody other than Capa taking the photograph.

Whelan takes pains to counter Knightly's sources, but never, in fact, mentions Knightly's book in his text. Whelan does provide some disturbing vi-

particular spot, acted as if shot for Capa's prefocused camera. Capa, by now in tears, then dramatically announced that due to his presence, one of the men actually was shot by an unknown sniper at the instant of exposure.

Despite his own compelling evidence, Whelan finally begs the question and writes, “But in the end, after all the controversy and speculation, the fact remains that Capa's Falling Soldier photograph is a great and powerful image . . . To insist upon knowing whether the photograph actually shows a man at the moment he has been hit by a bullet is both morbid and trivializing, for the picture's greatness ultimately lies in its symbolic implications, not in its literal accuracy as a report on the death of a particular man.”

But by this time, Whelan had con-

through the water on D-Day, 1944—is also questionable, but for reasons that are not entirely of Whelan's doing. He relates the oft-told story of *Life's* London dark-room having ruined the negatives of all but 11 of Capa's 72 photographs by leaving the film in the drying cabinet with the heat on high and the door closed.

“With no air circulating, the film emulsion had melted,” Whelan explains. “But not quite all was lost . . . eleven pictures were printable. They were, however, slightly blurred. *Life* disingenuously explained in one caption that the ‘immense excitement of [the] moment made Photographer Capa move his camera and blur [his] picture.’

“ . . . Ironically, the blurring of the surviving images may actually have strengthened /continued on page 115

Robert Capa

continued from page 59

their dramatic impact . . ."

Again, we turn to the visual evidence, the photograph itself on page 149 in *Robert Capa Photographs*, and discover that while, yes, the soldier, the landing craft, indeed all the subject matter, are definitely blurred, the grain is coarse and sharp. In all my years in photography, I have never known of a film emulsion to run as a result of dry heat, only to blister and peel and perhaps actually burn. Emulsions have been known to reticulate and sometimes separate and run due to overheated chemical solutions, but the sharp grain in the print indicates that that was not the case here.

I don't believe that *Life's* caption writer was being disingenuous at all: he could see with his own eyes that the picture was blurred because Capa moved his camera during the exposure. For further proof, turn to pages 150-51 of *Photographs*, and find two more pictures from the same sequence. One of them is blurred, and one of them is sharp; but both have the same grain structure.

On this point, not crucial to an understanding of Capa but certainly important in terms of setting the historical record straight, Whelan seems simply to have lacked the technical expertise to challenge one of his sources.

As *Photographs* shows, Capa's considerable power came from his ability to confront complex, highly charged events and come away with relatively simple, straightforward, even primitive photographs that communicated their messages instantly. For the first two-thirds of the biography, Whelan relates Capa's astonishing story in a similarly precise and straightforward manner. But while the author's tone is far from academic, I did find myself wishing for more juice. As a personality, Robert Capa was as labyrinthine as his photographs were unvarnished, and it is disconcerting to be looking at him through glass.

Whelan refers to many interviews conducted with Capa's friends and associates over the years, but rarely quotes them directly, and never extensively. And although Whelan lists at the back of the book 172 people who were interviewed or corresponded with, he provides no cross-referenced source notes with the text.

I have the same criticism for his otherwise thorough bibliography; when he provides new information or revises a previously accepted sequence of events, he often chooses not to cite his sources, no doubt to avoid interfering with the narrative flow.

Whelan is authoritative and I believe what he presents; but without source

notes, the serious student of photography is left curiously unsatisfied.

The book comes most alive in the final hundred pages; this is where Capa's own charismatic voice begins to come through. As Magnum photographer Eve Arnold says about Capa, "He had a charm and a grace and a lightness and a sense of self I've never seen in anybody else. There would be energy in a room as soon as he walked into it, the light would suddenly go on. You wanted to be near him, you wanted part of that effervescence, part of that zest."

Ernst Haas remembers the night he was nearly broke in London. At the time he was working on his then-new color abstracts, but told Capa he would soon be forced to leave on a journalistic assignment. "Very late that night, having had a winning streak in poker," Whelan writes, "[Capa] burst into Haas' hotel room, woke him up, and threw a giant wad of pound sterling notes into the air. 'All right,' he said as the bills floated down all over the floor, 'Now you can stay.'"

But despite his seemingly insatiable desires for love and life—or perhaps because of them—Robert Capa was, at bottom, a war photographer. He hated war, but he came fully alive in war. And ultimately, he died in war.

"Silently," Capa wrote of a picture he said was the last he made of World War II (*Images of War*, by Robert Capa, published in 1966 by Grossman), "the tense body of the gunner relaxed, and he slumped and fell back into the apartment. His face was not changed except for a tiny hole between his eyes. The puddle of blood grew beside his fallen head, and his pulse had long stopped beating. I had the picture of the last man to die. The last day, some of the best ones die. But those alive will fast forget."

Although the incident was described, this quote was not included in Richard Whelan's biography of Robert Capa, nor was much material quoted directly from Capa's own, evidently somewhat fictionalized but eminently readable account of his World War II experiences, *Slightly Out of Focus* (Henry Holt & Co., 1947). Whelan's portrait of Capa is accurate and revealing; what it lacks is the blood that ran through Capa's veins. Capa's own most famous quote might well apply: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

For a picture with more depth and shape, however, it will be necessary to make a trip to a well-stocked research library or perhaps a good used-bookstore, to add more of Capa's own words to Whelan's somewhat sanitized descriptions. The most difficult book of Capa's to find is *Death in the Making* (Covici, Friede, 1938), his classic account of the

Spanish Civil War, done with Gerda Taro and David "Chim" Seymour, and in which the "Falling Soldier" photograph unaccountably, but perhaps revealingly, does not appear—a fact not mentioned by Whelan.

But reservations aside, I recommend *Robert Capa: a Biography*. For anyone with an interest in photographic journalism or the mid-century cataclysms that shaped the political realities we now live with, this book should be required reading.

Consulting editor Jim Hughes is currently at work on *Larger than Life*, a critical biography of the photographer W. Eugene Smith to be published in 1987 by Little, Brown and Co. ○

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Designing a Photograph, by Bill Smith. New York: Amphoto, 1985; 144 pp.; hardcover, \$24.95.

A well-designed photograph grabs the viewer's attention, then guides his eye through the picture. It is the photographer's responsibility to provide visually organized images so this eye movement will be maintained; that's where this book can help.

Smith analyzes many photographs, discussing such things as how the mind sees and organizes information, the relationship of figure and ground, the grouping of elements, and the continuation of line. He talks about light, color, and camera angles. It's a book that will encourage you to look hard at the world in front of your camera. Chances are that you will see it differently and start creating better photographs. E.H.S.

Exhibiting Your Photography: A Manual, by Margaret McCarthy. Distributed by The Professional's Library, 17 Washington Street, Norwalk, Ct. 06856, 1984; 63 pp.; paperback, \$9.95.

Once you've reached a high degree of proficiency with your photographs, you'll want to exhibit your prints—but where do you show them? How do you make contact with potential exhibition places? What will it cost? From the planning stage through the opening reception, this practical handbook gives you the answers.

It tells about places other than galleries where you can exhibit and many ways to cut costs. It lists the items you ought to have in a written agreement, suggests how to handle publicity, and describes how to arrange the pictures on the walls. If you're going to put your photographs in front of the public, you'll probably do it more successfully if you consult this book first. E.H.S.

"Letters: Capa controversy"

... Hughes ... objects to my acceptance of the story of Capa's D-Day negatives having been ruined or damaged during processing in London. He bases his argument largely on the analysis of the grain structure in the reproductions in the Capa photograph book. Although Hughes is undoubtedly more of an expert on the technical side of photography than I am, it strikes me as rather risky to base such subtle technical judgments on photomechanical reproductions of prints made from copy negatives (the latter made long ago because the original 35mm negatives were too damaged to print from repeatedly).

Richard Whelan, New York, N.Y.

[Hughes replies:] ... My objection is to Whelan's acceptance of the oft-told tale that the D-Day negatives' emulsions had melted and run during drying, causing blurred pictures. My conclusion, that the blurring was caused by camera shake, had been reached long before the publication of Whelan's book, and was based on personal examination of prints, not on his book's reproduction.

Jim Hughes

[*Popular Photography*, Vol. 93, No. 4, April 1986, p. 90.]