

This paper is from a seminar at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation titled “The Fight About Justice and Pleasure in Women.” Ms. Bernstein discussed the life and art of important photographer, Tina Modotti. The Aesthetic Realism Foundation, is a not-for-profit educational foundation, at 141 Greene St., NYC 10012, (212) 777-4490.

## **The Fight About Justice and Pleasure in Women**

The Life & Work of Tina Modotti

*by Harriet Bernstein*

Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the American poet and critic, Eli Siegel, explains that justice and pleasure do not have to fight – we can feel an integrity in pursuing both. This is what I am glad to speak about today through instances from my own life, and aspects of the life and work of photographer Tina Modotti.

I learned this crucial fact: there are two kinds of pleasure. One, the pleasure of contempt – “the addition to self through the lessening of something else” – makes us ashamed and cruel. The other, the pleasure of respect for the world, makes us proud and satisfied to our depths. Had I not learned this, I would have been plagued my whole life, feeling I was cold, incapable of caring deeply for anyone or any thing, and unable to express what I felt.

### 1. Two Kinds of Pleasure in a Girl from Brooklyn

From an early age, one way I had pleasure that made me proud was through reading books; and it gave me great satisfaction to learn the

spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of words. But I also got pleasure from feeling I was more refined than what I saw as the insensitive, unfriendly world around me, that my thoughts were too precious to be known by people I saw as crude and insincere. “She’s such a good girl,” my relatives would say. “So quiet and well-behaved.” But I thought they were ridiculous because they had no idea what I felt to myself.

Meanwhile, I could abruptly change from feeling serene to being agitated and angry, and this troubled me very much. In his book *Self and World*, Mr. Siegel explains:

If one doesn’t please oneself deeply and comprehensively, one is not “unselfish,” well behaved, adjusted; one is unethical....To be ethical is to give oneself what is coming to one by giving what is coming to other things. To give oneself what is coming to one, is to enable oneself to grow, to meet objects accurately, to blend with externals fortunately, to meet the world felicitously; that is, to be happy....If one is not happy, one cannot be just to other things.

From the time I was very young, strangers actually came up to me on the street and asked, “Why do you look so sad?” “I’m not sad. My face just looks this way,” I would answer triumphantly, but I also had a feeling of shame.

The two hopes – to care truly for the world and to look down on it – continued as I grew older. Sometimes I wanted nothing to do with people

– but if there was a party, I was there! I loved dancing wildly, introducing myself to new people, talking for hours. But I knew that at the end of the evening I could go home and forget everything.

As a teenager I began to cultivate an appearance and lifestyle I considered more “honest.” I decided fashion and make-up were insincere, and later lived in a sparsely furnished apartment, sleeping on a mattress on the floor. While I cared for the beauty of rich fabrics and ornate patterns, I did not want to affirm my like of them in a world I saw as not good enough to affect me. I didn’t, as Mr. Siegel writes, “blend with externals” felicitously.

A woman whose life was very different from mine is the photographer Tina Modotti, admirable in having justice come to the people of Mexico in the 1920s, and fighting fascism with great courage in Europe and Spain during the 1930s. Yet, as biographer Margaret Hooks writes: “Tina agonized over the conflict she experienced between life and art, between the purity of inspired creation and...social injustice.” What Tina Modotti was hoping for in her life, as woman, artist, and fighter for justice, is explained by Aesthetic Realism in this unifying principle stated by Eli Siegel: “The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.”

## 2. Justice to Others Is Justice to Ourselves

Born Assunta Adelaide Luigia on August 16, 1896 in Udine, Italy, Tina Modotti was the third of seven children to Assunta and Giuseppe Modotti. Amidst great economic hardship, the Modotti children were encouraged to care for music, opera and photography, often visiting their Uncle Pietro's photography studio. Giuseppe Modotti, struggling to provide for his own family, was passionate about what others deserved and was an outspoken proponent of unions. As a girl, Tina proudly accompanied her father to May Day parades, hearing songs and speeches about workers' rights.

When her father and eldest sister went to America, planning to bring the family there for a better life, Tina, the eldest wage earner at 11, left school to work in a silk factory. But the family fell into even greater poverty. One winter evening, the children hungry and hugging each other for warmth, Tina returned from work with bread, cheese and salami, explaining she sold the shawl she had gotten as a gift. Her younger sister Yolanda recalled:

Tina, her knees knocking from the cold, insisted that she had not cared for the shawl....She had shouted with joy when they had given it to her and it was really the only [decent] garment of her scant winter wardrobe. When I began to understand how gallant [Tina] had been...I was overcome with a great admiration and respect for her.

At 16, Tina joined her father and sister in America, living in a close-knit Italian community in San Francisco. She immediately began working long hours as a seamstress in a factory where her lovely face and figure got her a part-time modeling job, earning extra money.



She also auditioned for the local theatre company and was accepted, soon gaining acclaim for her acting.

In 1917, Tina met Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey, an American illustrator and writer, known as Robo with whom she had a common law marriage. They often worked together in the studio they shared.



### 3. A Husband and the Fight between Contempt and Respect

I believe these sentences by Eli Siegel should be read at every marriage ceremony, in every language:

As soon as we give a person the right to affect us, we have to have respect. The tendency to say there was no good result at all or to hope for a bad result is very strong, and woman is a terrific battlefield between the pleasure of contempt and the pleasure of respect.

When I met Len Bernstein, I was attracted by his warm manner and his excitement about art, particularly photography, and we were married on January 11, 1975. But I had a sense that in caring for another person I was betraying myself. I punished my husband with sour looks that said “You’ll never please me,” and used going without him to dinner with friends, including male friends, to show him he didn’t

wholly have me. This clearly pained him, but when Len spoke to me about it, I accused him of being unreasonable.

I believe Tina Modotti made the mistake I and many wives have made – feeling that after marrying a man, we can manage or dismiss him and do not need to know him deeply. With whatever criticism may be of her husband Robo, his disappointment and pain were real – and vivid in the illustrations he made, including a drawing described by one biographer as of a woman resembling Tina “looking with contempt at the man she has just stabbed; the victim looks strikingly like Robo himself.” The pictures, while dramatic, stand for criticism men have of their wives – the deep hurt couples feel every day – “You’re taking the life out of me!”

When Robo learned about the cultural and social revolution taking place in Mexico, he accepted an invitation from his friend, the Director of Fine Arts of the Public Education Ministry of Mexico, to go there in December 1921. In fervent letters, he wrote home: “There is little that is devoid of beauty,” and “Can you imagine an art school where everything is free to everyone – Mexicans and foreigners alike....After ten years of war and unrest it is wonderful to see what is being done here.” But Tina, at this time, made a choice that hurt her life very much. When the American photographer Edward Weston, known for his powerful landscape photographs, asked her to model for him, Tina was flattered.

Instead of joining her husband in Mexico, she began an affair with Weston, becoming the subject of what she uncritically called his great photographs. Under the guise of romance, Tina used a man to glorify herself and contemptuously put the whole world aside in a vague mist, with herself at the center. For example, while she was receiving ardent letters from her husband about the cultural revolution in Mexico, Tina wrote in a letter to Weston:

[W]ith tenderness I repeat your name over and over to myself in a way that brings you nearer to me tonight as I sit here alone remembering.... Last night—at this hour you were reading to me from an exquisite volume – or were we sipping wine and smoking? – or had darkness enveloped us.... Oh Edward – how much beauty you have added to my life!

The “beauty” here is really self-love and vanity which weakens and disintegrates a woman’s mind, painfully evident as Tina, professing love, cannot recall the details of the evening she spent with a man just hours before!

Women have gotten pleasure using a man’s adoration to dim the meaning of everything else. And that’s what I had done with my husband. Once, I wrote him a “love letter” describing how during the day, as the man I worked for was speaking to me, his voice got faint and his face seemed to dissolve, as I thought of how Len and I had been close the night before. Meanwhile, I didn’t know the reason I also felt a sense of



shame about this was because I was using my husband and sex to put aside contemptuously the world and the feelings of people. Thankfully I began to learn why in Aesthetic Realism consultations.

These consultations are given in person at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City, and via telephone worldwide, and are education on the subject that concerns every person most – ourselves, seen with dignity and aesthetically. I remember being asked in one consultation in 1976: “Do you think that when we’re being close to a person, ordinary reality vanishes?” Yes,” I answered. With logic and humor, my consultants continued: “Everything in the room vanishes, and everything outside of the apartment vanishes? Sometimes, even the other person vanishes?” I was learning this way of seeing, and the accompanying shame, are not inevitable – and my gratitude for this is very large – we can have a purpose that strengthens us and is kind. “As you’re close to another person,” my consultants said, “could there be a feeling that it is consistent with being close to reality in a large sense?...You could hug a person, and it could be for their relation to everything.” I was so happy to learn what I didn’t even consider a possibility: the ecstasy people are truly looking for, including through having their bodies close to another, is the pleasure of respecting reality.

One month after Tina Modotti wrote her “love letter” to Weston, she went to join Robo in Mexico. On her way there, she received the tragic news that he contracted smallpox and, soon after she arrived, Robo died. Tina was agonized with guilt, but rather than be critical of herself and where she had a weakening effect, she preferred to see Robo as hurt by the world. In what was considered a tribute, she wrote: “Death came, swift and inexorable, and he vanished...from a world in which he did not belong.” This has in it the cold, unjust way wives dismiss their husbands – an annihilating contempt that, on an international scale, is the cause of fascism.

#### 4. Art Is a Oneness of Pleasure and Justice

Art is the beautiful opposition to contempt because, I learned, it is the same as justice – a person trying to be fair to what is not herself. Tina was deeply stirred by what she had seen during her brief stay in Mexico. Back in California, she told Edward Weston what she saw and in July 1923, they traveled to Mexico on the condition that he would teach her photography and she manage his studio. Tina was affected by the land and people, and sought to express this in her photographs...



Very soon she came to be esteemed by the Mexican people as a woman passionate about justice – a person making beautiful photographs who was, herself, beautiful.

In this photograph of a Workers' Parade, Tina Modotti looked down and slightly tilted her camera up so that we have a sense of rising, something hopeful.



The sun brightly and democratically reflects in the broad brimmed hats, while at the same time showing the individuality of each. Looking down is often accompanied by contempt, massing people together. But Tina's artistic choice is also ethical because she heightens the feeling of sameness and difference, each individual is distinct but also they are

joined in what looks like one fervent purpose – and those glowing hats give such a feeling of lift. Here is the aesthetics that a just economy must have – sameness and difference, personal and impersonal, simultaneous fairness to one and many, or individual and collective.

Tina learned a great deal about photography from Edward Weston, but eventually parted ways. Tina's photography, which she called her "precious work", continued, as did her passion for justice. Following the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua in 1927, she participated in the "Hands Off Nicaragua Committee" campaign. She helped found the first anti-Fascist Italian committee. And working with the "United Front for Sacco and Vanzetti", she organized protests of the hideously unjust execution of two innocent Italian immigrants by the U.S. government.

I believe what she was hoping for in making this powerful photograph of two children...



who stood for thousands suffering in poverty because of an economic system based on contempt, is explained by Eli Siegel in these mighty sentences from his essay “Afternoon Regard for Photography”:

The purpose of art is to make the world seem to have sense. When the world really makes sense, not because it is fortunate for us or goes our way, we have a big emotion. But we have to have it not by leaving out anything. The purpose of art then is to show, through an object and the way an object is seen, that the world in all its horror, does make a little sense.

Tina Modotti looked head on and close up at the suffering of these two children. Their meaning is large as they fill the frame. Their young limbs covered with clay dust, they seem to almost rise out of the earth

itself. Their expressions are different. The young boy looks both angry and bewildered but shows tenderness as his arm is around the little girl's shoulder, her soft cheek meeting his hand. He is distressed, one hand touching his stomach, perhaps hungry, yet he shows concern for another. His eyes look out and his mouth is open, almost as if to say "Why is this happening?" And his young face looks aged. The girl's cherubic face has an expression of dullness, looking dazed. And within the pain there is the orderliness of patterns behind them. The photograph gave form that was kind to the suffering Tina saw, suffering she fought to end.

But her ability to affect men came easily, and she had many conquests. It was a pleasure that had her feel against herself and warred with her resolve to have justice come to people. As time passed, this fight debilitated her, made her want to recede from life. She wrote to a friend, "I feel defeated for having nothing else to offer and for having no more energy for affection." Her torment could have been alleviated by the knowledge that the purpose she had as an artist, she needed to have in her relation with men – to want to know and respect them, not use them for narrow comfort and pleasure.

Tina Modotti endured a great deal, more than I can say here, including imprisonment by a reactionary government that eventually

exiled her from Mexico. But she never stopped fighting the brutality of fascism. Traveling with forged documents, she went on dangerous missions into fascist Europe. From the first day to the last, Tina was in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, distributing arms to the volunteer troops, and responsible for channeling food, cash, medical equipment, and clothing destined as aid for the troops. She risked her life time and again, traveling through enemy waters at night to help evacuate refugees, carrying children to safety under a hail of bullets.

In this stirring photograph of a woman holding a flag at a parade...



there is determination and ease in the woman's expression and her posture. The sense of pride and humility in her is echoed in the flag of



plain dark cloth that swells out. The diagonal line of both the flag and the forward angle of the woman's body shows beautiful and subtle energy. Advance and retreat are one, as Tina Modotti was so much hoping they would be in herself.

A 1938 French publication paid homage to "Maria," the assumed name she used to protect herself, making a reference to her "ailing heart." As 1942 approached, things looked more promising and the U.S. had just entered World War II. But Tina could not reconcile her despair and her great hope for the world. Tragically, on January 5, 1942, she suffered a heart attack and died, hundreds of people mourning at her funeral. Her life shows how much people everywhere are looking for the explanation by Aesthetic Realism ([www.AestheticRealism.org](http://www.AestheticRealism.org)) that art and the happy pursuit of justice stand for the greatest pleasure every person hopes to have.