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The Duke and Duchess of Windsor: We Are Not Amused

October 9, 2009 by [lisa waller rogers](#)

Photographer **Annie Leibovitz** doesn't talk to her subjects when photographing them. "I certainly can't talk to people and take pictures at the same time. For one thing, I look through a viewfinder when I work."

(1)

But famed photographer **Richard Avedon** had a different style. Leibovitz observed that Avedon "seduced his subjects with conversation. He had a Rolleiflex that he would look down at and then up from. It was never in front of his face" but next to him while he talked. (1)



Self-Portrait by Richard Avedon (1923-2004)

In this way, Avedon got what he wanted from his sitter. According to writer **Truman Capote**, Avedon was interested in "the mere condition of a face."

Some, though, felt that Avedon's impulses had a cruel edge, showing the face in a harsh light. Here's a case in point: In 1957, Richard Avedon scheduled a New York City appointment to photograph **the Duke and Duchess of Windsor**, formerly **King Edward VIII** of the United Kingdom and **Wallis Warfield Simpson** of Baltimore. The Windsors were very practiced at putting on happy, regal faces for the camera



Truman Capote, author of "In Cold Blood" and "Breakfast at Tiffany's" photographed by Richard Avedon in New York City, 1955.

and Avedon anticipated that. As a royal pair, they were endlessly photographed since they had nothing better to do with themselves since the Duke abdicated the British throne in 1936, giving up crown and kingdom, and moving to France with Wallis.

But Avedon didn't want that kind of stock photo of the royal pair.

According to another fellow photographer, **Diane Arbus**,

Avedon knew that the Windsors were avid dog lovers and would use this knowledge to cruel advantage. This is what he did: When Avedon arrived at the appointment to photograph the Windsors, he got them seated just as he wanted them then told them a lie. He explained how, on his way to meet them, his taxi had accidentally run over a dog in the street and killed it. As the Windsors flinched with sympathetic horror, Avedon clicked the shutter – and caught their expression. Here is that photo.



The Duchess and Duke of Windsor with one of their beloved pugs.



The photograph caused an international sensation. Some said it made the Duchess look like a toad. British Royalists were outraged at the unflattering portrait. But Avedon defended lying to the couple to conceive the portrait, arguing that his photographs tended to show what people were really like.

If that was indeed true, the Windsors appeared to be two very dreadful people, a suspicion already aroused by their most ungracious familiarity with **Adolf Hitler** and his **Nazi** cronies in the pre WWII years. While living in an elegant Paris home provided by the French government on a lavish income bestowed on them by the British government, the Windsors regularly made pro-fascist remarks to the press as well as disparaging comments about their lack of loyalty to either of their host countries, France and Britain. They palled around with British traitors like **Oswald Mosley** and wife **Diana Mitford** in the French countryside until the Duke's brother, the reigning **King George VI** of the **United Kingdom** got wise to the danger and shipped them off to **the Bahamas** for the duration of the war.

Avedon once remarked that the Windsors loved dogs more than they loved Jews.

(1) Leibovitz, Annie. *Annie Leibovitz at Work*. New York: Random House, 2008.