

PHOTOGRAPHY ●

BATE

Since its introduction nearly 200 years ago, photography has become part of everyday life, a position consolidated by the recent development of digital imaging and manipulation. Used to confirm identity, to sell products, to reshape the real, to visualize the news, to record and communicate the personal moment, and as an art form in its own right, photography is now one of the most accessible and pervasive of media.

Photography: The Key Concepts provides an ideal guide to the place of photography in our society and to the extraordinary range of photographic genres. Outlining the history of photography and explaining the body of theory which has built up around its use, the book guides the reader through the genres of documentary, portraiture, landscape, still life, art and global photography. Illustrated with a range of historical and contemporary images and case material, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in photography.

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PHOTOGRAPHY / ART / CULTURAL STUDIES

Design by Raven Design
ISBN 978 1 84520 667 3



THE KEY CONCEPTS

PHOTOGRAPHY

3 DOCUMENTARY AND STORY-TELLING

Telling a story with pictures is an old device (e.g. stained-glass windows in churches, illustrated manuscripts), but documentary photography gave the idea new life and social function. Documentary emerged as a popular practice across a variety of media after the First World War and developed throughout the twentieth century. Neither art nor advertising, documentary drew on the idea of information as a creative education about actuality, life itself. Documentary aimed to show, in an informal way, the everyday lives of ordinary people to other ordinary people. The idea, of showing 'everyday life' of one group of people to another group, rapidly became popular in the early twentieth century and remains a significant component of modern mass communications culture today. In this respect, the modern notion of documentary is a media product of the twentieth century.

This birth of documentary as a popular form is clearly linked historically to the rise of a large-scale mass press, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s (and even during the Second World War¹). The emergence of popular illustrated photo magazines, which began to flood the commercial magazine markets from the mid-1930s, in the USA, *Picture Post* in Britain, *Drum* in South Africa, and many others created a constant flow of news stories and pictures, documentary 'stories' of everyday life. The photographer became a new media field-worker required to supply magazines and newspapers with photographs to fill the magazine pages. This demand accelerated the industry of photography and photographer-reporters, who began to play a key role in the competitive production process of magazines. (Picture agencies developed, to represent the interests of these photographers.) The photographer became the one 'out there' bringing photographs home, a 'reporter' of everyday life who supplied the pictures (and in some cases stories too) for this growing market. Most of the famous documentary photographers from that period, now known as authors



Figure 3.1 Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), 'Blossom Restaurant; 103 Bowersy', 3 October 1935. Gelatin silver print. From her series *Changing New York*, first published as a book in 1939. Works: Progress Administration/Federal Art Project. Photography Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Berenice Abbott proposed *Changing New York*, her grand project to document New York City, to the Federal Art Project (FAP) in 1935. The FAP was a Depression-era government programme for unemployed artists and workers in fields such as advertising, graphic design, illustration, photofinishing, and publishing. Abbott assisted Man Ray in Paris around 1923–6, where she also rescued and promoted the work of Eugène Atget. Learning from Atget's ambition to 'document' old Paris before its destruction, Abbott developed her own documentary

exhibitions has eroded the historical context in which many 'great' documentary pictures were produced.²) Pictures or picture stories that seemed innovative or creative were often produced in this context of photographers responding to a 'brief' set and published by a magazine.

The aim of social documentary work was not only to record and document, but also to enlighten and creatively 'educate'. The new photographically illustrated magazines emerged all over the world, with photographers as the new journalists, 'reporters', and information gatherers who developed a 'picture story' – a sequence of images that could tell a story by itself with only basic, minimal contextual writing to accompany it. These stories showed the world in motion and full of life, represented by people 'in action': shown smiling, laughing, or looking angry while 'doing' something like work, play or travelling.

EDITORIAL CONTROL

The arrangement of pictures on a page could help to organize the story, such that the layout of pictures on the page became a key means of articulating a story. Individual pictures could be put in a sequence (even if they were not shot in that order) to show an event or social process unfolding in time. Pictures could be organized to indicate their significance and meaning; for example, several smaller pictures gathered around a larger central portrait could be used to show the different aspects of a character (happy, lonely, excited, etc.), or different aspects of their life (work, home, etc.). Initially, these picture essays 'translated' the literary conventions of novels – a sequential logic – but quickly developed more innovative arrangements to tell a visual story: journalism through pictures. Not strictly linear as in writing (i.e. reading from left to right and top to bottom of a page), pictures were organized *spatially* to construct a narrative effect, reinforced by basic written captions, an introductory text and title. As is now well known, cropping of photographs is an essential part of this process, to emphasize specific meanings.³

However, the creative art of page layout was not often in the hands of the photographer, which meant that the specific meanings attached to the individual pictures, the way they were organized in the page layout in relation to the events they depicted, could be beyond the photographer's control. The picture and magazine editor determined the choice and order of pictures, and the way they were used (captions, etc.). Editors had to think about their advertisers and audience, matters of social taste and potential legal or political issues. Censorship and editorial control could easily seem inseparable. This division in editorial work – the photographer handing

between what a photographer or journalist saw and intended the photograph say, and what the magazine wants. Even the sequence of pictures on a page radically affect the story told. Editorial control is a key issue and the conflict between photographer and editor over photographic meaning remains highly relevant to documentary photographers today, i.e. the question of where, how and under conditions to publish the work. This issue of control and meaning, coupled with ambition, led to photographers publishing their own work as photography books.

AUTEUR PHOTOGRAPHERS

The 1930s was also the time when documentary photographers became 'auteur' photographers, authors with control over their own work, publishing their photographic work as photo-books.⁴ Brassai's famous book *Paris du nuit* [translated as *Paris After Dark by Night*] (1933) is only one of many examples from this period. Brant's 1938 book *A Night in London* and even Weegee's later, more journalistic book *Naked City* (1945), followed this model. In these documentary photographs the photographs were given more prominence than the writing that accompanied them.

Brassai was a journalist during the daytime (and one-time painter) and took photography to supplement his written journalism work. Ironically, it is now photographs that he is most remembered for. Photography certainly came of age in modern mass industrial technology during this twentieth-century period.

There was an obvious technological factor here too. The sense of immediacy and spontaneity involved in the production and consumption of photography and cinematography (accelerated by technical developments like the flash light bulb, 35mm film, lenses, the Erminox and Leica cameras) meant that these media were understood as intrinsically 'modern' and 'democratic'. Photographic still and moving images were also linked in a general way to a growing sense of political and ideological urgency after the First World War, for a new and different world that was struggling to emerge: democracy driven by the 'common people'.⁵

DEMOCRATIC VISION

The impetus for the commercial development of documentary came from the rise of mass democratic movements, given inspiration by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The revolutionary avant-garde ideas of Productivism, Factography, Constructivism in the USSR and the nominal importance given to ordinary

Western democracies (and, arguably, to indigenous peoples in colonies too). Inspired by the idea of Factography, the 'representation of the people' was essentially absorbed widely into societies that had little or no tradition of it, like Britain.⁶ The early years of the twentieth century saw the birth of a whole range of documentary movements around the world, groups of people who organized and made representations of themselves or others for a wider public in film, photography, writing and sound recordings. Cinema too, as the massively popular new form of entertainment, gave an optimistic sense that the world belonged to (or soon would) 'the people'.⁷ The ambitions of most of these documentary movements can be seen as driven by the demand for a new reality and a recognition that what ordinary people did in their lives *mattered*.

Pictures and text (writing, voices, sounds) were 'recorded' and combined to create vivid images of the social fabric of people's real existence – their 'reality'. 'Sensation' meant *feeling* and *knowing* reality, no matter how gaudy, shocking or banal. How bread was made, for example, was fascinating to *see*. For the documentary photographer or film-maker, freed from any baggage of painting or art history, social truth was embodied in the modern technological process of 'documenting'. Documentary photography was thus a tool in a broader movement of social change and liberal attitude. The idea was to *inform* the wider population, to encourage them to understand, become involved and informed about life in the 'century of the common people'.⁸ In this respect, 1930s documentary was mostly orientated towards social and democratic knowledge (if not socialist goals of greater equality), if only in terms of education. It is worth remembering, for example, that this was a time when mass literacy was still an ambition and had not yet been achieved. There was a belief that mass media communication would lead to a better world, that information was education, and that education meant the social good.

Such optimism, not yet shattered by the Second World War, would later coalesce around a basic demand for humanity; 'humanist' photography became the dominant post-war documentary tendency, what Martha Rosler calls 'liberal documentary'⁹ (see 'World Photography' in Chapter 8: *Global Photography*).

In the 1930s, 'worker photography' movements across Europe, inspired by the Russian example of the 1920s, insisted that common people ('workers') should represent themselves in photographs to show their shared 'common condition'.¹⁰ Self-representation was a form of self-knowledge, which would help to transform social relations as experiences were shared with others around the world. Internationalist in perspective, such organizations embodied optimism about photography as a tool of international, if not yet global, communication. Even less radical uses of

stories on 'illicit love' or 'The French leaving Vietnam' after Communism had its root, they were still stories from the 'real world', whatever their importance or ideological view given to them.

All these uses of photography were conceived as *social* documentary, aimed at depiction of the real world and people in it, whether in public or private, at home or wherever. Social documentary was emphatically about social experience. This was an aim far removed from the general idea of a photograph as a 'document' or a type of proof. While not totally dissociated, social documentary was a far cry from the use of photography by the state as 'documents', for instance in police mugshots or social surveillance, etc., the use of those pictures as visual evidence, photographs as documents within a legal/judicial system, whose apparatus of the court would decide the validity of them as documents.¹¹ Certainly, the idea of 'documentary' can be read across both social documentary and evidence photography in institutional disciplinary uses, but it would be wrong to confuse the value of a photograph in a court of law with the *affective* value of social documentary photography on a more general public. Yet, it is here that the problem of defining documentary photography emerges.

Documentary can refer to a category so wide as to be meaningless (*all* photographs as 'documents') or so narrow that it cannot deal with even its own eclectic history in social documentary. Even during the 1930s, the look, approach and the photographs that were regarded as documentary varied enormously, such that it would be wrong to define social documentary as a singular style. This also makes criticism of documentary a more complex issue too. If documentary practices are different as the visual means used to achieve them, then how to define documentary photography as a social practice? Should we separate or collapse together the work that set out to define particular social groups as a problem with those that seek to undermine their social stigma as 'others'? How might we interrogate whether all such practices create images of victims? How to locate the ideological or political attitude seen in social documentary work, whether as a form of humour, political criticism, or even as 'reality entertainment'?

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

In retrospect, we know that there were photographers working in a documentary mode earlier during the nineteenth century, long before it became a popular form in the early twentieth century. This tendency came out of social criticism or journalistic reformist, these projects used photography with written texts, coming

and political injustices. Nineteenth-century photographers, like Matthew Brady, Jacob A. Riis and Lewis Hine in the USA, or John Thomson and Henry Mayhew in Britain, are all example forerunners of those interested in a photo-documentary mode. They all aimed to inform, educate and disseminate the truth about an issue by using photography, alongside writing. The issues they documented – war, slums, immigrants and child labour, and street workers (respectively) – already pre-empted the territories and subject matter of later social documentary photography. These men (early campaign photographers were mostly men) wanted to demonstrate that documentary seeing was a way of knowing and, further, that knowing would improve humanity. The emphasis on ‘seeing’ was to show something as true, associated with giving the reader empirical evidence with a strong pedagogic or even judicial tone. The idea of the photograph as providing documentary ‘evidence’ came into currency.

Matthew Brady’s photographs of the American civil war (or the ones ascribed to him) can be seen to have defined the genre of war photography: battlefield scenes of the aftermath of death, destruction and decay. Jacob Riis, initially a police reporter, took up photography himself to record the slums of east New York during the late nineteenth century. His work can already be seen as orientated towards a more sensationalist journalism, showing, even staging, scenes in the ghetto, which excited the anxieties of his middle-class lantern slide audience and newspaper readers. His infamous 1890s book *How the Other Half Lives* nevertheless gave a startling new ‘photographic’ visibility to a hitherto unseen, hidden world (the first edition had half-tone and line engravings).¹² The later work of Lewis Hine is more exemplary of modern campaigning social work. Not only did he meticulously photograph children at work in their industrial environments and note all their details, but he also disseminated these documents in magazines as proof of the need to legislate against child labour. As an active political campaigner, Hine promoted photography as a tool of social criticism and, in particular, the need to represent people at work.¹³ His pictures of children, for example, are not defined as a ‘problem’ (as in Riis’s work) but as exploited and in need of protection (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). John Thomson’s 1870s pictures of London streets, published as a book, *Street Life in London*, categorize people by trade, yet maintain a vivacity of life about them, in the manner of later documentary images from the 1930s of ordinary people in the real living conditions of their working lives.¹⁴

This tradition was developed and refined in Germany in the 1920s as part of the ‘New Objectivity’ (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), which in the hands of August Sander became a systematized photographic method of observation. Sander developed a

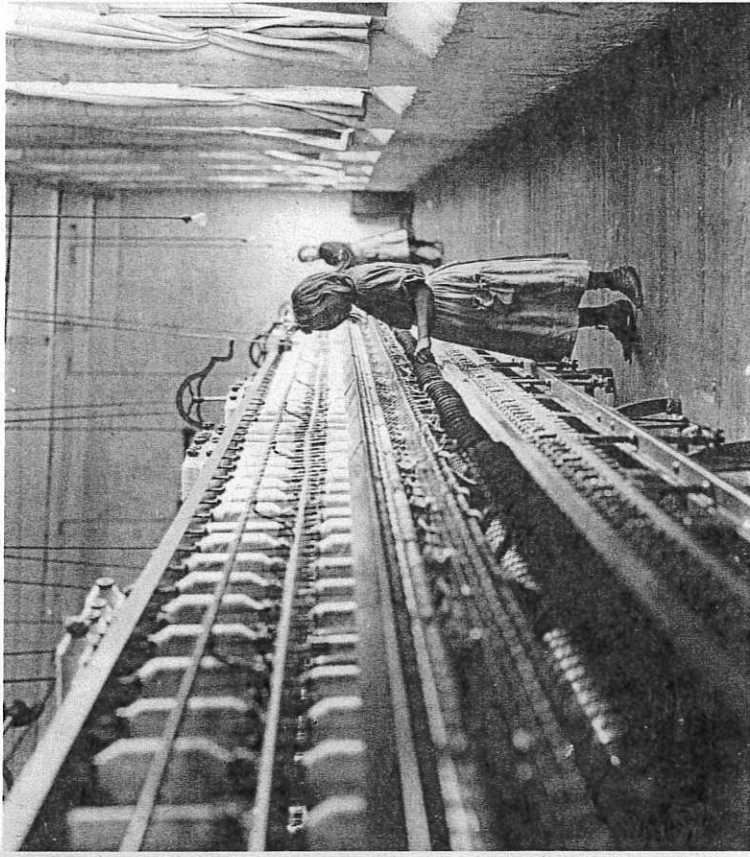


Figure 3.2 Lewis W. Hine (1874–1940), ‘Sadie Pfeifer, 48 inches high, has worked half a year. One of the many small children at work in Lancaster Cotton Mills, 30 November 1908. Location: Lancaster, South Carolina.’ Photograph from the records of the National Child Labor Committee (U.S.). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, USA.

photographic technique. Although no longer part of any social or political campaign the work was thoroughly democratic in inspiration, since whoever was photographed (skilled or unskilled, gypsy or office bureaucrat, butcher, etc.) had the same ‘treatment’: a self-dignity in their social identity whatever it was or whatever it is via a direct gaze at the camera. Walter Benjamin, the often-cited German critic of photography, wrote at the time:

Sander goes from farmers, the earthbound men, and takes the viewer through

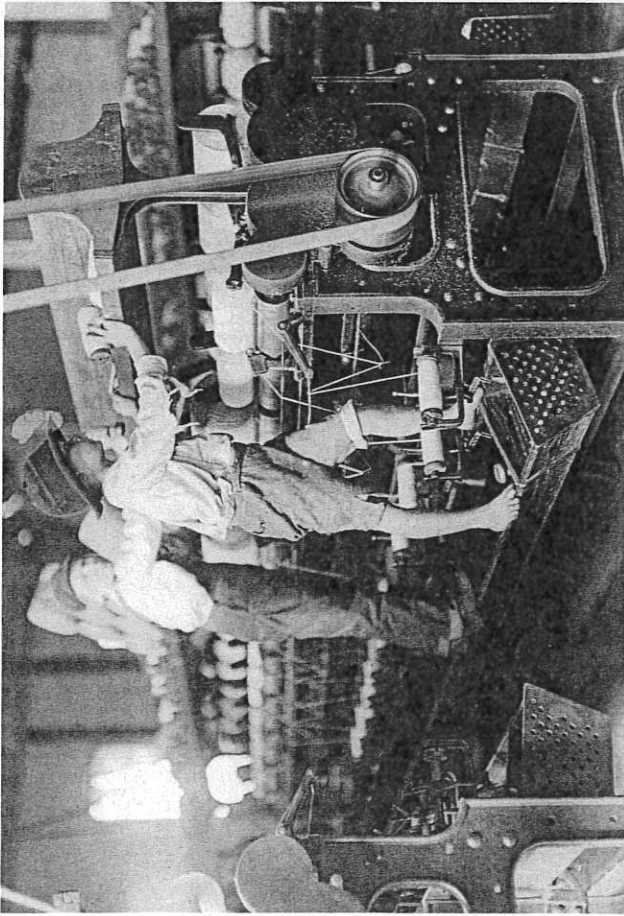


Figure 3.3 Lewis W. Hine (1874–1940), 'Many youngsters here. Some boys were so small they had to climb up on the spinning frame to mend the broken threads and put back the empty bobbins. Location: Macon, Georgia. 19 January 1909.' Photograph from the records of the National Child Labor Committee (U.S.). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, USA.

a scholar nor instructed by racial theoreticians or social researchers, but, as the publisher says, "from direct experience."¹⁵

While certainly a type of social documentary photography, this comparative technique (typology of character) developed by Sander, so indifferent to the prejudices of the viewer, was a long way from the optimistic campaign social documentary seen in many magazines. These other types of photography were inspired by the dynamic compositional techniques of Soviet Constructivism, Factography and worker participation. A dynamic angle in these photographs represented not merely a political or aesthetic metaphor for social change, but (for Alexander Rodchenko at least) a *literally* different view of the world. In comparison, Sander's photographs looked more socially static, some might even say stagnant, with little sign of

expression in the subjects' faces (an absence that still draws interest to the picture today) despite their attentiveness to the camera, was a long way from the *express* photography in magazine-based social documentary work. Here ordinary people were seen in a range of emotions, like laughter, sadness, boredom, frustration, etc. The new 'century of the people' demanded that the subjective expressions of people be represented along with the appearance of their bodies in action.

By the 1930s then, it is possible to see two general modes or tendencies operating within the idea of documentary photography: one can be loosely defined 'objective' and the other as 'subjective'; a binary opposition proposed by Otto Stein in Germany after the Second World War in his thesis on subjective photography.

These two tendencies privilege either a *neutral* camera view, the so-called 'objective' approach (e.g. John Thomson, August Sander and the Parisian, Eugène Atget) or the subjective idea of an instantaneity, the 'capturing' of a fleeting instant as an expression of everyday life. Technically, in semiotic language it might be said that the former 'tripod-photography' emphasizes the *informational* codes, the quality of the lens and film (e.g. depth-of-field, high-fidelity information), while the latter 'shutter' photography privileges the *stylistic* and *iconographic* codes (e.g. blur, cut-edges, human movement indicating speed and time) of the camera. It is the latter although already known since the 1890s, that becomes a documentary innovator in the early 1920s, developed in the idea of *reportage*.

REPORTAGE

As the historian Eric Hobsbawm notes:

'Reportage' – the term first appears in French dictionaries in 1929 and in English ones in 1931 – became an accepted genre of socially-critical literature and visual presentation in the 1920s, largely under the influence of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde who extolled fact against the pop entertainment which the European Left had always condemned as the people's opium.¹⁸

Although reportage was partly derived from the idea of the 'snapshot' photography already prevalent in amateur photography of the 1890s, this type of picture seen to imply a greater expressive quality, 'subjective' both in its mode of production: the visual connotations it produced. The mode of 'objective' photography was already an established convention, long before reportage and documentary were coined the general terms for the photographic expression of a social interest. (Seventeenth-century Dutch 'descriptive' paintings exemplify the objective tendency too.) The distinction between *objective* and *subjective* is useful, and only meaningful.

objective than another only really means that one has hidden its ideology within a rhetoric of neutrality and description, while the other flaunts its codes of subjective investment. We might then speak of these as two key different modalities of documentary. We could describe the objective mode as *cold* and subjective as *hot*. Thus in the ambition of documentary to show and tell 'social stories', different strategies can be employed.

In Peter Wollen's fascinating essay 'Fire and Ice', on photography and time, he makes the clear distinction between three categories of photograph and their respective potential to signify:

News photographs are perceived as signifying *events*. Art and most documentary photographs signify *states*. Some documentary photographs and Muybridge's series in particular are seen as signifying *processes*. From what we know about minimal narratives, we might say that an ideal minimal story form might consist of a documentary photograph, then a news photograph, then an art photograph (*process, event, state*).¹⁹ [My italics]

Wollen then shows how early narrative cinema conventions also followed this pattern to create short stories in an image-sequence, as *process, event, state*. This is useful here because social documentary employs all three of these strategies, moving across and between them to narrate the stories of everyday life through photography.

The photograph by Berenice Abbott at the beginning of this chapter shows a street scene in New York, taken as part of her documentary photographs of New York City for the Federal Art Project during 1935–9 on 'changing New York' (Figure 3.1). In the picture, a complexity of written messages appear in the photograph that serve to indicate the 'busy character' of the street. A restaurant, barber shop and hotel all have signs – indicating at least three different activities in this area. The picture shows how it looks, but also points to social *processes* that occur there too via the display of signs. The figure ascending the staircase meets our look, constituting an *event*. His response to the photographer is directed at the viewer too, in a kind of 'decisive moment', as though asking what 'we' are doing there. His look challenges the spectator directly, and we are put *outside* the scene. (He is not saying: 'Hi, come in'.) This positioning, between the viewer and the scene, finds us *looking into another world*, which is partly why the photograph is successful.

Documentary pictures can show social processes, the actors within it (events) and the conditions in which it takes place (state). The 'neutral' type photograph shows the state of something, its 'condition', while reportage uses both event and process to show them as life story 'experiences'. This helps to explain why documentary is itself such a slippery category too, since it can embrace different modes of practice, using



Figure 3.4 Walker Evans (1903–75), 'Flood refugees, Arkansas', c. 1937. Gelatin silver print. A detailed shot of flood 'refugees' feet showing their shoes; Forrest City, Arkansas. Farm Security Administration, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/Photographs and Prints Division, NYPL, USA.

interpreted. This may also account for the recurrent popularity of a photograph like Walker Evans, known among specialists as the 'photographer's photograph'. His highly influential work emphasizes the photograph as a 'document' variety of different ways, as seen in his photographs for the 1930s Farm Security Administration documentary project (Figure 3.4).

Already familiar with the work of August Sander and Eugène Atget, E believed photography should be a 'photographic editing of society'.²⁰ All manner cultural objects and common processes are subject to the scrutiny of Evans's can objects, people, things and signs for things, in fact anything that made up ever. life. This eclectic subject matter is then given a treatment of 'frontality' – ob depicted 'directly' (from the front) as in the work of Atget and Sander, but comb with a more 'subjective' framing (a close-up or casual cropping of subject mat

Documentary photography hovers *between* art and journalism, between creative treatment and actuality, the very terms that the founder of documentary film, John Grierson, had combined to define social documentary: the 'creative treatment of actuality'.²¹ 'Reportage' is similarly an ambiguous concept, ranging from the reporting of an event as news to the description of social processes and their impact on people, whether as individuals or as a whole social group. The photograph as 'document', then, might be used to refer to the representation of a state or *condition* of something, while 'documentary', as used in the 1930s, implies the depiction of a process or event. While the rhetorical conventions of the objective photograph (the portrait, the landscape, etc.) merely privilege codes of neutrality and description, those of 'subjective' photography prioritize action and movement as 'expressive realism'. The key theory of this expressive realism in social documentary is most famously embodied in the terms of the auteur-photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson: as the 'decisive moment'.

'DECISIVE MOMENT' AS PERIPATEIA

Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous idea of the 'decisive moment' fuses a notion of instantaneity in photography (the freezing of an instant) with an older concept from art history: story-telling with a single picture. The problem of how to depict an entire story or event within one picture was the problem that beset 'history painting', the genre that deals with the depiction of important historical events. Although history painting did not have the immediacy of photography, it did have the similar task of depicting a story in one instant. The ideal way to represent a complex event, it was argued by the eighteenth-century German dramatist and critic, Gotthold Lessing, is to show the 'pregnant moment' of the story, where the past, present and future of the story can be read, summed up, 'at a glance'.²² Otherwise known as the *peripateia* (from the Greek, meaning 'dramatic moment' or 'sudden change of fortune'), the pregnant moment is the instant when the future of the story will be determined; the moment of 'anticipation' when the story is in the process of being decided.

In the Cartier-Bresson picture shown in Figure 3.5, the natives [*sic*] carry the heavy picture of their European (Dutch) colonial governors out of the stately building. The picture was taken in Jakarta, Indonesia, the day before independence was formally recognized by the Dutch in December 1949 (although it had been proclaimed four years earlier, on 27 August 1945, it was fought over until then). The picture in fact shows one of three hundred portraits (of Dutch governors) being moved out of the Governor's residence (later known as Istana Merdeka or Palace of

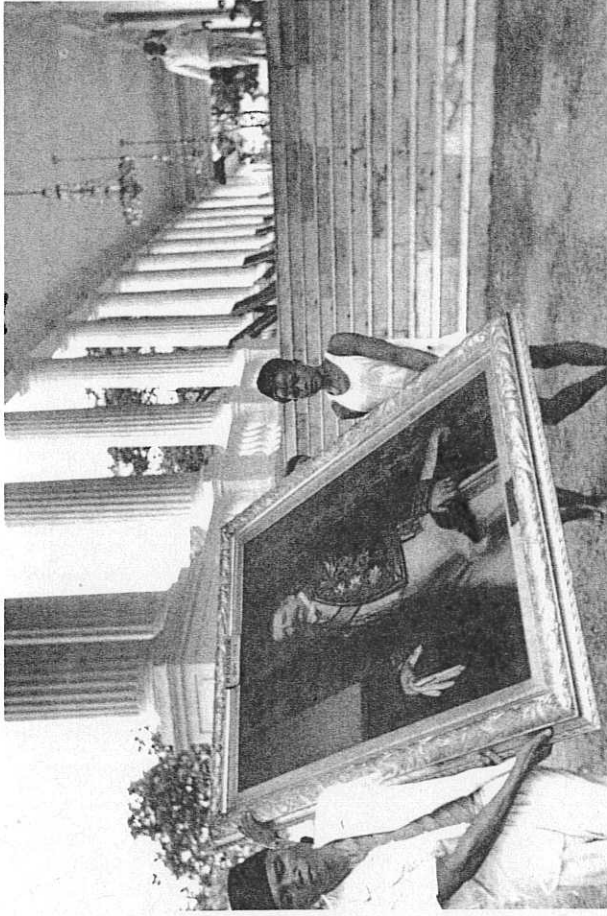


Figure 3.5 Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), 'INDONESIA, Jakarta, Independence, 1949'. © Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos.

'heaviness' of ridding themselves of the image of their former Dutch masters. This is the pregnant moment in action: the literal and symbolic representation of achieving independence, pictured as the weary end of colonial rule. (Indonesia went through a huge social revolution as well as political struggle during the four-year period of struggle.)

Cartier-Bresson, already a keen snapshot photographer before he became famous, was almost certainly familiar with this concept of the pregnant moment from his art tutor, André Lhote, the established art critic, teacher and cubist painter, whose own paintings had a conception of *instantanéité*. In fact, Henri Cartier-Bresson formulates his concept of the decisive moment in a very similar way, as: 'one unique picture whose composition possesses such vigour and richness, and whose content so radiates outward from it, that this single picture is a whole story in itself'.²³ The pictorial anecdote that 'radiates outward' from a single frame to a 'whole story' was also theorized in montage cinema too, notably by Sergei Eisenstein, whose work Cartier-Bresson explicitly cites as influential for his photographic work. Probably

caused by the past whose outcome is anticipated by what we see in the picture. The viewer of the picture can run their imagination back and forth across the time before and after the depicted action to *imagine* the sequence of events constituting the story, which a single picture can only *imply*.

The use of *peripeteia* is also typical in successful news pictures, especially war photographs, which can be seen as the heirs of history painting. In fact *famous* war photographs usually become so precisely because they seem able sum up an entire episode of a significant historical event through a single image (e.g. the famous Eddie Adams Vietnam photographs, or even the Abu Ghraib snapshots from Iraq). The decisive moment is thus the instant when the photographer must click the shutter (harder to do with the slow shutter delay of some modern digital cameras) to capture not 'reality', but the *dramatic instant* that will come to signify it. In this mode of documentary work, the camera is perhaps better thought of as a *portable* theatre or studio, where the photographer 'stages', creates a scene from the flux of life. The photographer operates the camera when the figures are juxtaposed in the right combination of gestures, expression and action. This art of staging is the common trade of the cinema and theatre, but also crucial to documentary and news photography too. We might, like film and theatre studies, also employ the concept of *mise en scène* in photography, since it recognizes the work of staging and mediation that goes into the production of any visual meaning. It is at this point that the criticism of documentary as *realist*, and its claim to truth and reality, begins to plague the photographer.

STAGING REALITY

The inevitable *mediation* involved in all photography, decisions about the position of the camera within and toward the event, the spatial relations of it, etc., are what organizes the *staging* of the scene. 'Composition' is here simply the organization of raw material into photographic codes, a rhetorical form to create a *reality effect*. The 'neutral' mode of descriptive photography merely attempts to circumvent such criticism by signifying its 'neutrality' through frontality. By facing the subject matter head on, it is also deploying the rhetoric of photographic codes too. This is not to dismiss documentary, but, as John Grierson, the acknowledged founder of social documentary once said in a lecture:

The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound. It does not matter whether that interpretation comes by way of the studio or by way of documentary or for that matter by way of the music hall. The important

For Grierson, a good documentary is a good 'interpretation' of real life, one 'lights up the fact'.²⁵ The means is not proscribed as essentially one form or another as 'staged' or not. So documentary could include a number of approaches; it is a *interpretation*, not objectivity or truth. In this sense, the two modes of documentary discussed here offer different genres (sub-genres) of social documentary interpretation. Reportage (and snapshots) signify human involvement and expression of life events (from a subjective and fragmented viewpoint), while so-called objective descriptive photography offers a more disengaged position (an objectified, distanced position) to the scene. Despite the differences, both subjective and objective variant modes of the 'straight photograph' and depend on the idea of witness 'life', which is so crucial to the documentary form.

EYEWITNESS

The aim of documentary is to make the spectator into an 'eyewitness'. A spectator can participate by *seeing* 'with their own eyes' what the photographer has seen. An argument built on trust that what we see is what the photographer had seen. A contract between photographer and audience is thought to be independent of context in which we see the image, and must 'tell the truth' by itself. The photographer becomes an agent of truth, producing 'documents' whose responsibility to truth is ultimate and ethical. Caught up in this ideology of vision as premised in the documentary argues that we can 'see' truth *visually*.

The two tendencies in documentary photography as first-person or third-person documents (expressive/neutral, subjective/objective) positions the viewer differently in relation to the events. The subjective viewpoint appears involved and engaged in the event, while the neutral picture seems to lack commitment, as almost indifferent or disengaged. The 'concerned' photographer might therefore find reportage attractive as the rhetoric of engagement in life. This human expressive aspect remains a key feature of reportage-type photography in snapshots and subsequent practices even today, no matter how far ideals of photographic truth are criticized and dismissed. Equally, with descriptive photography we live with the fact that someone has chosen or (by default) used a point of view, lighting, and so on in the depiction of things, people, events, whether an event in a newspaper or anonymous historical snapshots. Pictures show something we tend to believe exists if it fits with our perception of reality. However, being a witness always implies a definite point of view, situated here or there, which makes a difference. Documentary photography is no different and it can be thought of as the point of view of a witness who is telling the

In fact, 'story-telling' implies a potential for fiction and subjectivity. When you or I witness an event, our stories may be quite different; because of where people stand it can seem different, even though it was the same event. In a court of law the judge will decide what is true (though they might still get it wrong), but in the world of documentary the viewer is not necessarily in any position to 'judge the facts', beyond what they are given, and can only form an opinion based on what is given or already known. In this sense, documentary photography always has an opinion, no matter how subjective or innocent the picture (or the photographer who took it) appears to be. A documentary photograph *always has a point of view*.

The stories implied in Henri Cartier-Bresson's photography, for example, are all wilful 'interpretations', comments whose rhetorical form can be revealed by analysis of the images. It becomes possible to 'see' how they stage a particular set of relations.²⁶ Cartier-Bresson's humanist approach was formative for a whole school of documentary-inspired 'street photography', as a means to comment on everyday life, but less concerned with goals of social reform or general education. This type of photography worked well for the photo book, as in Cartier-Bresson's extensive post-war books (e.g. *The Decisive Moment*, *The Europeans*, *China in Transition*, *The Face of Asia*, *About Russia*), where the work could maintain an extended argument, an independent essay with a coherence less possible in the short space of commercial newspapers and advertising-led magazines. In Cartier-Bresson's photo books each photograph reads like a part fragment of a larger picture, adding up to a coherent yet still fragmented picture of modern life. Almost filmic, this photographic form was developed by Robert Frank in his seminal 1950s book *The Americans*, which feels even more fragmentary and fleeting, as though seen from a passing automobile. This of course was part of what caused the initial hostility towards it and the later success: that it had recognized – as in a road movie – the transience of youth of 'America' itself as an image of ideals and life.

The attraction of such work is the vision of the free-roaming individual, the photographer, out for 'decisive moments', as a romantic but sustained version of reportage. Rather than working for a newspaper, the photographer is separated from the masses, yet living among them, anonymous like a modern *flâneur*. This idea has a strong appeal not only for its air of independence and way of seeing, but as a way of life.

For the jobbing photographer, however, impatient for a quick story and short of time to achieve it, it was not unseen to encourage things to happen by giving a 'helping hand' to reality. This was not frowned upon at all (and laid the origins for paparazzi as *provocation* photography), but not publicized either. In 1930s Paris,

scenarios that he had seen or envisaged.²⁷ 'Staging' here is not a negative re-criticism. In the theatre 'staging' can mean *realist*, *naturalist* or *anti-realist*. Their reason why staging (*mise en scène*) cannot be used in the same way for photography 'Staging' refers to the act of creating a scene, it does not imply any lack of reality merely acknowledges the work involved in the production of meaning in pictorial composition.

REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Documentary, as the founders of the movement knew, relies on the construction of an image of reality in *representation*. This construction, on which the whole of documentary was based, can also be described as manifesting a desire for reality. That is to say, documentary emerged as the wish to see something, recognize reality. It is in this sense of persuasion that documentary was, at origin, a project. Whether it was the recognition of the plight of the poor in the American 1930s depression, as represented by the Farm Security Administration project to date, one of the most significant collective documentary photography projects in the USA²⁸, or more recent work on wars and their aftermath, like exposing migrant labour, racism, genocide or other catastrophes, documentary contributes how and *what we see as reality*. The very recognition of what was not 'recognized public (e.g. the plight of migrants, homeless, poverty, excluded ethnic groups as reality has given the justification for taking photographs of these people in lived circumstances. However, this desire for recognition of reality is not only a part of the photograph; it also involves the spectator. Documentary pictures suggest that there *is* a reality – 'look at this!' – and it is in this sense that we argue that: documentary photographs construct *representations* of reality, according to someone's view, their desire to see.

DESIRE TO SEE

While 'reality' is what we believe exists (in this sense our views are always theoretical), it also involves what individuals *wish* to exist. Images of deviance or explicit racist discrimination may, quite simply, not fit that wish, as here that the politics of vision comes to play a role in the crucial issue of what we do with the knowledge presented to them in documentary (or in fact all) photography. 'Confronting reality' is not something that the human species has always been

surprising if a documentary that sets out to change the mind of its audience does not succeed easily or even completely fails to do so. Yet that does not mean that the work of *representing* is pointless. Nothing can be given in advance.

The idea of witnessing invokes the concept of voyeurism, defined as an illicit or obsessive act of looking. Even legitimate (socially acceptable) looking, as in documentary, nevertheless has a component of voyeurism within it. The often-felt sense of guilt or shame that accompanies voyeuristic looking, with its origins in sexuality (an infantile curiosity in the details of other people's bodies²⁹), is directed at what is seen, as though the thought 'how dare you show me that', manifests in being annoyed at the photograph; at what is shown in it; or even at the photographer. Outrage and protest at photographic representations show that representation can intervene in a spectator's belief in reality. Seeing equals truth, but only where a spectator has an investment. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, puts it like this in his essay 'What is a Picture?':

How could this *showing* satisfy something, if there is not some appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking? This appetite of the eye that must be fed produces the hypnotic value of painting. For me this value is to be sought on a much less elevated plane than might be supposed, namely, in that which is the true function of the organ of the eye, the eye filled with voracity, the evil eye.³⁰

Lacan's thesis, that looking can be invested with jealousy, introduces the less noble aspect of looking. Looking (the wish to see) is not necessarily *seeing* (as knowledge), but merely the wish to observe, to make sure someone does not have what you have. While none of this is necessarily specific to documentary alone, it is relevant here because of the reality effect invested in the documentary genre. The eye, full of envy, may even enjoy the sight of destruction, via the sadistic component in looking. In short, whether conscious or unconscious, the narcissism of the viewer (in Freudian theory 'narcissism' is what helps to maintain the human subject, it is not a judgement of character) is involved in the capacity to recognize, deal with or perceive 'alien' matter. Documentary photography, like other domains of visual knowledge, negotiates these complex dynamics via the spectator's interest in 'visual pleasure'.³¹ Even the use of painful images in charity advertising, where guilt and shame in looking at those less well off, is explicitly used to raise funds, has to pass via this same economy of visual pleasure.

This brings us back to the question of who is looking at the pictures under what conditions, where, when, how and why, which should not lead to the, somewhat generalized, criticism that documentary constructs a victim for its always privileged

by any particular viewer, conditions of viewing, or in the fundamental signifying trope offered in the specific images. The direct address to the viewer, for example a subject in the picture, does not ensure that pity, empathy or respect are felt by the viewer. Under such conditions, documentary has had to renovate itself, adopt different strategies to attract audiences.

The development of the visual form of documentary, into what is usually called 'modernist' aesthetics, has been one way in which documentary photography has renewed itself and the interest in depictions of everyday life. It is worth just concluding here with some aspects of this type of renovation – most obviously, with the turn to colour from black-and-white photography in the early 1980s and the more recent turn to a higher fidelity image quality (medium-format film came and high-resolution digital cameras).

COLOUR DOCUMENTARY

The idea that reality is depicted in monochrome grey, as 'black and white', remains a dominant conception in much documentary work until the late 1970s. Gradual during the 1980s, the use of colour photography began to appear in documentary art. After Cartier-Bresson, 'street photography', as a specialized type of documentary and art photography, stayed steadfastly a black-and-white world. Documentary was distinguished from advertising and commercial editorial photography, which all used colour, by being *monochrome*. The argument in documentary cinema much as documentary photography was that colour was too 'easy', 'superficial' or 'cosmetic', too close to advertising (as openly fake).

These arguments eventually gave way to colour becoming the 'new reality' during the 1980s, with the emergence of colour photography in newspapers too.

Certainly, visual pleasure played a part in this shift as much as technological developments (greater stability in colour materials), with the sense that colour might bring a 'new' veracity to concerned photography. Yet there is an aesthetic twist here too. The use of colour photography had been increasingly dominant in amateur snapshots from the 1960s onwards.³² The idea of snapshots as offering a more authentic access to reality, due to its '*naive realism*', helped to renovate documentary as offering an unmediated access to reality. The more 'authentic' realism of the colour snapshot was gradually absorbed into the style of documentary photography – a newer, so-called 'amateur' *snapshot aesthetic*. The shift of focus from the public social sphere to more intimate and private spheres of often quite personal issues, not only renovated an interest in documentary topics perceived as 'worn out', but also

entirely documentary, William Eggleston's work (*The Democratic Forest*) would be an obvious example here, alongside Nan Goldin (*The Ballard of Sexual Dependency*), both from the USA, while Richard Billingham (*Ray's a Laugh*) in Britain or Boris Mikhailov (*Case History*) from the Ukraine have all employed a snapshot-based aesthetic in their work. Simultaneously, since the 1980s the use of medium- and even large-format cameras with colour film has created a newer, higher fidelity colour documentary tradition. Documentary photographers have recently returned to the use of the tripod to make static views of the world, reinventing documentary through combining portrait and landscape genres. The conventions of Atget or Sander, for example, are now revised and developed in the work of German art photographers like Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth, to mention only a few.

TABLEAUX ON THE STREET

Straddling these different tendencies are Jeff Wall's art photographs, what he calls 'near documentary', which represent a reincarnation of the *peripatetic* tradition of history painting in photography for the art gallery. Although reminiscent of illuminated advertising billboards, Wall's images use the historical device of the *tableau* (a constructed decisive moment) combined with the logic of realism and instantaneity of the photograph. The themes of his work also certainly belong to a kind of social documentary and the tradition of critical realism in painting.³³

Yet the two dominant modes of documentary, *expressive* and *descriptive* (or the problematic, *subjective* and *objective*), continue to vie with one another and keep the original idea of contemporary social documentary alive. This has even manifested in the newer forms of dissemination, the domain of the www. 'Reporters without Borders', 'citizen journalists' and bloggers providing 'realistic' accounts of everyday life, politics and cultural affairs, and suggest a renewed vitality and fascination in sharing life experiences via documentary and reportage. While many of these practices within the public domain only require uploading to the www, others working within the major institutional media sites of power are still subject to the same processes of filtration (selection, editing and control) discussed at the beginning of this chapter. So the rhetorical form of documentary photography still exists, but has had to cast off the older pictorial values that it subscribed to, if only because they have been relentlessly parodied. Thus, documentary reality had to find another voice and place within the contemporary media spectacle, like in art.

Chapter Summary

- The making of documentary work not only involves shooting pictures, but also the process of selecting (editing) pictures from those taken to make a body of work. This may include cropping, use of captions and titles, establishing the overall context for the work.
- The motivation for documentary photography is to 'creatively inform' an audience about another part of the population, whose life and experience may be unfamiliar to them. The aim of the work may be to criticize, celebrate, support or attempt to reform the situation they describe.
- The tactics adopted by photographers range between tripod-based views and hand-held scenes (tablets) which create distinct viewer positions usually perceived as either an objective or subjective 'witness' position.