

Documentary photography



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Intro

Documentary photography is extended form — that is, a work composed of a sizeable number of images. Some relation to text is a given, even if it's only minimal, as in the identification of subject, date, and location; the text may in fact be extensive. There is no external time limit implicit in this form; some documentary projects have stretched over decades.

For this reason, the documentary photographer is likely to have the opportunity to refine the project, not only through the analysis of the work-in-progress at various stages but even by the reshooting of unsatisfactory segments of the work. The elaborate nature of such projects lends itself to subjects that are seen as enduring; for much the same reason, the final forms they assume tend to be durable: the book and the exhibition have to date functioned as the primary embodiments of documentary projects, though certain audio-visual formats are serving this purpose with increasing frequency.

The expose, the compassion and outrage, of documentary fuelled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism, and metaphysics, trophy hunting – and careerism.

It is easy to understand why what has ceased to be news becomes testimonial to the bearer of the news. Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the

trouble. Or who, like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go. War photography, slum photography, “ subculture” or cult photography, photography of the foreign poor, photography of “ deviance.”

As I see it, the intentions of a documentary photographer are to record some aspects of reality, by producing a depiction of what the photographer saw and which portends to represent that reality in as objective a manner as possible.

I believe we have already discussed in all sorts of forums the fact that photography per se, is tantamount to manipulation. That the impact of the lens selected, the film chosen, and all the other technical variables leave ample room to question the so called “ faithful representation” of reality. So let us not mull over this one endlessly, as I think it thins the debate rather enhances it.

The journalist is not some copier machine that simply reproduces mindlessly what is placed on the platen in front of her. He weaves and puts together the information in order to insure that it accurately portrays the information presented in a decision making process that supports the story being presented.

As I have come to understand it, it has mainly to do with past traditions and customs. It apparently flies in the face of reason, that if one would alter an image, it no longer could call itself a document. What is wrong in that analysis is that any and all alterations have been treated equal (they are all bad). We know for a fact that not all alterations have the same justifications

behind them, that some alterations can even contribute to enhance the veracity of an image rather than the opposite. Furthermore, many of the fears related to the conceptual changes for photography have to do mainly with a loss of certainty of what the photograph actually is delivering, in so far as a document, with little debate about the veracity of the content of a given image.

We are of course dealing here with the same sort of ethical debates around editing a story, be that with text or film, even sound tracks, something everyone has been discussing for a long time. For photography it is no different. Why should it be?

Since the 1980s photojournalism has been at a crossroads. Digital technologies do impinge on the routines, rituals, traditions, and behaviors of photojournalists. Digital technologies do require a variety of skill-sets that could not have been imagined a half-century ago. The photojournalist of the future will understand the ethical responsibilities that come with electronic digital manipulation.

The rise of documentary photography does not spring from fashion. Rather its rapid growth represents strong organic forces at work, strong creative impulses seeking an outlet suitable to the serious and tense spirit of our age. The proof that documentary photography is not a fad or a vogue lies in the history of other movements in photography.

Against this pattern of sterility, of ideas which could not reproduce themselves, we have the new function (and evolving from it the new esthetic) of documentary photography, an application of photography direct

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and realistic, dedicated to the profound and sober chronicling of the external world. To Lewis Hine, who thirty-five years ago was making photographs of child labor in sweat shops and textile mills, the vague tenets of pictorialism or the even less useful purposes of the “ photogram” or “ rayograph” must be incomprehensible. To the hard-working photographers of the Farm Security Administration, the somewhat remote and abstruse manner of the spiritual heirs of the Photo-Secession may seem too refined. To such a photographer as Berenice Abbott, setting down the tangible visage of New York in precise detail and lineament, the sentimental fantasies of a Fassbinder must be well nigh incredible.

We have all had a surfeit of “ pretty” pictures, of romantic views of hilltop, seaside, rolling fields, skyscrapers seen askew, picturesque bits of life torn out of their sordid context. It is life that is exciting and important; and life whole and unretouched.

By virtue of this new spirit of realism, photography looks now at the external world with new eyes, the eyes of scientific, uncompromising honesty. The camera eye cannot lie, is lightly said. On the contrary, the camera eye usually does nothing but lie.

But the external world is those facts of decay and change, of social retrogression and injustice—as well as the wide miles of America and its vast mountain ranges. The external world, we may add, is the world of human beings; and, whether we see their faces or the works of their hands and the consequences, tragic or otherwise, of their social institutions, we look at the

world with a new orientation, more concerned with what is outside than with the inner ebb and flow of consciousness.

The fact is a thousand times more important than the photographer; his personality can be intruded only by the worst taste of exhibitionism; this at last is reality. Yet, also, by the imagination and intelligence he possesses and uses, the photographer controls the new esthetic, finds the significant truth and gives it significant form.

Body

A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal end. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy — almost an affection — for the imperfections and frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value — no less precious for being irrational What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.

Contemporary documentary practice by photographers such as Fazal Sheikh, Simon Norfolk, Luc Delahaye, Paul Graham, Martin Parr and Pedro Meyer examine the social world with a measured sense of contemplation, challenging the traditional conventions of documentary photography in revealing a vision and voice about the real world.

As I see it, the intentions of a documentary photographer are to record some aspects of reality, by producing a depiction of what the photographer saw and which portends to represent that reality in as objective a manner as

possible. If we can agree to that description, I can already see our critics pounding on their desks accompanied by some degree of glee on their faces, as they suggest that this is precisely the reason why there is no room for the computer to be used in recreating documentary images.

That the impact of the lens selected, the film chosen, and all the other technical variables leave ample room to question the so called “ faithful representation” of reality.

So why are so many people up in arms about the idea that a photograph edited in the computer is not really a true documentary representation? As I have come to understand it, it has mainly to do with past traditions and customs.

It has been widely commented that much of the important photojournalism of the last several years has been done by amateurs — London Underground bombing, Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse, coffins of American soldiers coming from Iraq, young woman being flogged in Afghanistan, etc. And now, of course, there are the many images from Iran by amateurs which become even more critical as professionals are banned from the country.

Instead of a single iconic photograph we will often be looking at imagery made by people who, as amateurs, are not schooled in the history of photography—they will be making imagery for information, not to replicate or create new icons. As such, their imagery will probably often be both more original and more awkward, but it may also make it more difficult to find the telling metaphors. In this sense, the imagery will be more modest and probably more credible.

The need for professional photo essayists with deep understandings of specific cultures, both insiders and foreigners, is more crucial than ever. Somehow they must be paid for their work, and equally important is to find places for them to publish.

Like writers and editors, photojournalists are held to a standard of ethics. Each publication has a set of rules, sometimes written, sometimes unwritten, that governs what that publication considers to be a truthful and faithful representation of images to the public. These rules cover a wide range of topics such as how a photographer should act while taking pictures, what he or she can and can't photograph, and whether and how an image can be altered in the darkroom or on the computer. This ethical framework evolved over time, influenced by such things as technological capability and community values; and it is continually developing today.

News images shape our culture in ways both profound and deep.

These photos have woven themselves into the collective memory of a generation. There are some who would even say that the mounting weight of photographic evidence was the primary cause for public opinion to shift against the war in Vietnam, and hence effected an end to the war itself. As such, to borrow a phrase from pop culture, "With great power comes great responsibility." ¹ Responsible photojournalism means adherence to a standard of ethics.

Photographic and video images can reveal great truths, expose wrongdoing and neglect, inspire hope and understanding and connect people around the

globe through the language of visual understanding. Photographs can also cause great harm if they are callously intrusive or are manipulated.

Ethics is an inherently subjective field. In his seminal textbook, *Photojournalism, the Professionals' Approach*, author and photojournalism professor Kenneth Kobre writes, “ Photojournalism has no Bible, no rabbinical college, no Pope to define correct choices.”⁸ There is no sole arbiter of what is or isn't ethical, and even if there were, the line isn't always black and white. Most texts regarding ethics in photojournalism focus on the issue of what might be termed “ photographic truth” – whether a particular image accurately represents the subject or whether it misleads the viewer. The National Press Photographers Association Code of Ethics states that the “ primary goal” of the photojournalist is the “...faithful and comprehensive depiction of the subject at hand.”

Additionally, photojournalistic ethics might encompass the choices an individual photographer makes while shooting. For example, should a war photographer put down his cameras in order to help an injured soldier? If someone asks that his or her photo not be taken, is it ethical to photograph that person anyway? If ethics in photojournalism is about being “ faithful and comprehensive,” is intentionally underexposing or poorly focusing unethical? Some of these questions sit on the line between journalistic ethics and professionalism.

Utilitarianism as a philosophy attempts to weigh positives and negatives of a situation, and maximize the good for the greatest number of people. For example, if gruesome photos of a car crash offend the victims' families, but

shock the community into driving safely, then by Utilitarianism the taking and publication of those photos is deemed to be ethical.

Photographer-centric ethics have to do with photographers' choices at the time news photos are captured up until the photos are handed off to an editor. Whether or not to pose a subject, the question regarding what to do with a wounded soldier in combat, and how a photographer treats an image in the darkroom (or in the computer) are all matters of photographer-centric ethics.

The method used to reproduce photographs on the printing press was not perfected until the 1880's, and it was not widely adopted for several more years. The New York Times, for example, did not publish photos until 1896. Though The New York Times printed its first photographs in a Sunday Magazine in 1896, the newspaper was not without visual imagery before then. Advertisements in The Times throughout the 1880's feature drawings and etchings, and those tools were occasionally used for news purposes.

Though photography was known to many people and gaining popularity as an art form at the time, newspapers lacked the technology (and therefore the ability) to include photographic images as part of their reportage. This, however, did not stop some newspapers from hiring photographers and making use of their images. Some period newspapers employed both graphic artists and news photographers.

This process was used at many different newspapers from the late 1800's to the early 1900's. The hand-drawn images were popular with readers, and publishers were loathe to switch over to the newer photographic technology.

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That technology, the halftone process, employed a fine screen that converted an image to a series of dots.

When, at last, newspapers and magazines were able to regularly feature photographic images, the photos themselves were almost as much of a story as the news itself. Newspapers throughout the early 20th century are rife with “ world’s first photo of ...” images.

Around the turn of the century, smaller and less complex photo equipment started to become available. Celluloid film, first used for photographic purposes in 1888, was rapidly replacing glass as the substrate for photographic chemicals. This, along with Kodak’s famous “ Box Brownie” camera allowed more people to start taking photographs of their own.

Among the public, the spread of amateur photography sparked by George Eastman’s Kodak and other small cameras and the invention of faster lenses, shutters, and film led to a taste for candid, often close-up images with a sense of immediacy and spontaneity: the posed group portrait was obsolete in leading media by circa 1900.

In the 1930’s, technology started to work in the photojournalist’s favor. The Leica camera, invented in 1914 and marketed in 1925, gained popularity first with photographic luminaries such Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and then slowly with the rest of the industry.

Thwarted by military censors from reporting the “ what, where, and how” of World War I, journalists engaged the “ who” – the human interest stories that were already a staple of early 20th century media. These were cheaper and

easier to file than hard news and analysis. they were also encouraged by the new light weight cameras and faster lenses introduced in the mid-1920's.

These easily handled cameras performed in low light and could be used surreptitiously. If they did not give birth to the paparazzi as well as “ street’ photographers – those nimble observers of life’s odd encounters and human comedies – they helped make spontaneous, sharp-eyed photojournalism a key language of modern vision. They changed the approach of photo reporters: no longer official observers beholden to those in power, photojournalists could be the eyes of the public — prying, amused, or watchdog eyes.

The split in U. S. society over the war in Vietnam and the controversy about it worldwide were reflected in media coverage, which in turn helped sharpen opposition to the war from around 1968. Photojournalism itself changed. The issues were too complex for neat photographic embodiments, and the war itself had few triumphs.

While posing photos and staging news events had been taboo for some time, there was little precedent to inform photographers as to how and whether to render aid to their subjects during active combat. On one hand, helping a wounded soldier might have saved his life. On the other hand, “ helping out” made photographers complicit with their subjects, and removed some of the distance necessary for journalistic objectivity.

As photographic technology continued to evolve into the 1980's and 1990's, so too did photojournalistic ethics. The early 1990's saw the dawn of purely digital news photography. In the 1980's, magazines and newspapers started

to experiment with incorporating digitized images into their layouts. Though some photojournalists were carrying laptops to remote places, setting up makeshift darkrooms, and scanning and transmitting film photos, the digital switchover did not start in earnest until 1992.

With digital technology came digital photo manipulation. While the tenets of ethical news photography still held, there were notable breaches.

Throughout photography's history, an unsuspecting public has been fooled by manipulated images. What is of concern to modern media watchers is the justifications used to alter images through computer technology – not the fact that such alterations can be published without detection.

The difference between today's "citizen photojournalism" and the aforementioned examples is the ubiquity of the imaging devices in modern society. In 2004, consumers bought 257 million camera-equipped mobile phones. By comparison, during the same time only 68 million digital cameras were sold. 69 Millions upon millions of people are walking around with cameras in their pockets, waiting to become accidental photojournalists. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people in the general public are not aware of the nuances of photojournalistic ethics. Worse yet, there are people who actively try to dupe or trick the mainstream media into using ethically questionable (or flat-out fake) images. Not only can faked photos be misleading, they can have dramatic real-world consequences. During the 2004 election, it was briefly but widely reported that Senator John Kerry and activist Jane Fonda spoke at the same anti-Vietnam war rally. The

accompanying photograph depicts Fonda and Kerry standing together at a podium.

Nowhere was the power of citizen photojournalism more clearly demonstrated than in the summer of 2005 during the London subway bombings. On July 7, 2005, three bombs exploded on London subway cars, and a fourth detonated on a bus. Fifty-two people died, and some 700 were injured. 74 Within minutes of the blasts, citizens began chronicling the aftermath using both standalone cameras and cameras embedded in mobile devices. While working photojournalists and other members of the press responded as quickly as they could, their still images were not as intimate or immediate as those taken by the affected passengers. Some of those passengers who took pictures with their mobile devices later uploaded them to photo-sharing websites like flickr. com. The next day, in a journalistic first, both The New York Times and the Washington Post ran front-page camera phone images that were taken by citizens, not by photojournalists. 75 In describing the emerging citizen journalism trend, Dennis Dunleavy of The Digital Journalist writes, “ The future is here, now. The future came with the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the devastation of the tsunami in the Pacific late last year, and now without question, London. The digital camera phone is the future and we have much to learn from this emerging technology.” 76

Conclusion

The great challenge here is to deconstruct previous templates so that they not be relied upon to continue the generic typecasting of journalism – famine, flood, bombing, crime wave, accident, power figures, etc. A conversational media will begin with the humanity of the person (the

subject), not their social ranking. Rather than being looked at by the journalist, it will be generally better to think of the subject as potentially becoming involved in the conversation.

Since photography itself is only about 150 years old, this was not always the case. It would be impossible, of course, for “ photojournalistic ethics” to predate photojournalism itself.

While the concept of “ ethics” has been around since the dawn of recorded history, photography has not. As of this writing, photography is still less than two hundred years old. It is fairly obvious that no ethical system could exist for any sort of photojournalism before photography was invented. This might appear to suggest an acceptable date from which to begin studying ethics in American photojournalism – why not start at the beginning of photography? Even after Nicéphore Niépce fixed the first permanent photographic images in 1826, it took several decades (and several inventors) before mankind had the technology to marry photography with text on the printed page.

Photojournalism is a large and diverse field with very little consensus regarding ethics, even within small sub-genres (community newspaper photojournalism, for example). While most working press photographers should be aware of the consequences of ethical breaches, there is no “ Photojournalist’s Hippocratic Oath,” no common Ten Commandments of ethics in photojournalism, nor are there standard “ punishments” for ethical violations. Each publication and news organization sets its own ethical standards, which may simply come down to what it will tolerate, or what will sell more papers, in terms of pushing the ethical envelope.

Sometimes these rules are written down in concrete codes of ethics, and sometimes they are simply the empirical sum of what is acceptable to the staff or a particular editor at a particular publication.

Images in our pages that purport to depict reality must be genuine in every way. No people or objects may be added, rearranged, reversed, distorted or removed from a scene (except for the recognized practice of cropping to omit extraneous outer portions). Adjustments of color or gray scale should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction, analogous to the “burning” and “dodging” that formerly took place in darkroom processing of images. Pictures of news situations must not be posed. In the cases of collages, montages, portraits, fashion or home design illustrations, fanciful contrived situations and demonstrations of how a device is used, our intervention should be unmistakable to the reader, and unmistakably free of intent to deceive. Captions and credits should further acknowledge our intervention if the slightest doubt is possible. The design director, a masthead editor or the news desk should be consulted on doubtful cases or proposals for exceptions.

After tracing the history of ethics in photojournalism and examining the state of those ethics today, one cannot help but wonder where photojournalistic ethics are going. Since nobody can confidently predict the future, the only option is to examine current trends and extrapolate. Certain issues are on the cutting edge of the present photojournalistic ethics discussion, and those issues are likely to play significant roles in shaping tomorrow’s photojournalism. Of course, without a crystal ball there is no way to be sure.

From the invention of flash powder that made it possible for Jacob Riis to document the hideous conditions in New York tenements, to the Adobe Photoshop software that Brian Walski used to doctor his image, technology has certainly played a part in the evolution of today's ethical system. One might even say that technology has been the predominant influence in the evolution of today's ethical system (at the very least, but for the technology of photography itself, there would be no photojournalism). Likewise, technology will almost certainly be the driving influence regarding ethics in the future.

Multiple factors will drastically change the ethical landscape. These include the further assimilation of digital photography work-flows into the newsroom, the improvement of consumer photo technology, and the omnipresence of photo technology – including cameras in portable devices such as cell phones and PDAs. The shift away from printed material and towards electronic media for image consumption will also leave its own mark on photojournalistic ethics.

Digital photography is the predominant means of image capture for American newspaper and magazine photojournalism today. Not only has it been that way for several years, the rate at which it has taken over is astounding.

This bitwise blitzkrieg of sorts has brought with it new and difficult ethical challenges. In the “ old days” before digital photography, images had a definite physicality. Photographs were fixed on pieces of film – acetate coated in a chemical emulsion – and developed in chemical baths. A

photograph was something that could be held in one's hand. While not impossible, it was far more difficult to pull off a convincing photo fake. Twenty years ago, Brian Walski could never have doctored his image in the field. What might have taken minutes on his laptop would have taken hours, or even days, in a darkroom. Though the news cycle has sped up considerably since then, even two decades ago most newspapers and magazines couldn't afford that sort of delay before publication. 65 Using Adobe Photoshop, the software with which Walski effected his fake, is more convenient, more effective, and easier than altering photos in a wet darkroom.

Newer cameras and more powerful editing software both impact photojournalistic ethics, however sometimes that impact can be surprising. Since so much of the substance of journalistic ethics is about the process rather than the result, technology that enables new (or old) processes will automatically impact the ethical landscape. One recent example is the release of the Nikon D2x camera. The D2x is a professional caliber SLR with a unique feature – it allows the photographer to create multiple-exposure images in the camera itself. 66 Before digital imaging, most SLR cameras came with a switch that allowed the photographer to cock the shutter without advancing the film. This allowed the photographer to expose the same frame of film multiple times. One frequent use for this feature was to couple it with a motor drive, and take a sequence of photos that showed motion throughout a single frame. With the advent of the digital SLR, photographers lost the ability to use this technique in-camera. For a similar effect, photographers could take a series of images and overlay them with

digital editing software. Most publications, however, insisted upon labeling these images as “ photo-illustrations” because of the ex post facto manipulation. The Nikon D2x restored the photojournalist’s license to create multiple exposure images.

In addition to professional equipment, consumer and “ prosumer” camera technology is also improving, and cameras included in mobile devices are starting to become more popular. Many of these mobile devices are networked (cell phones, for example), and are capable of transmitting images in near real time. During major news events, some photo editors are inundated with images from “ citizen photojournalists.” 67 Citizen journalism, of course, is nothing new.

This widespread citizen media production and consumption raises an important question. With more and more people carrying cameras in their pockets, will the future have a place for the “ professional” photojournalist? At first the question seems compelling for two reasons – access and tools. In terms of access, it is impossible for a small cadre of trained photojournalists to be everywhere and to photograph everything that is newsworthy. There were no working photojournalists aboard the London bus and trains that were bombed, but there were people with camera phones. With each successive generation of camera phone improving in resolution and quality, the gap between the professional’s tools and the citizen’s tools is closing, just as the ubiquity of those tools is increasing.

“ Professionalism,” however, connotes more than being in the right place at the right time with the right camera. In the photojournalism industry,

professionalism means technical skill, news gathering experience, and of course ethics. Photojournalist Nancy L. Ford writes:

A photojournalist's job is to go out and experience life for others, to capture an event on film, and hopefully capture the emotion that was experienced, so the readers can see and feel what it was like to be there.

The photojournalist must capture the truth, too. This means the photographer must only photograph what has happened, when it happened and not recreate a situation because they didn't get there on time. They must not move things around on the scene of an event to make the pictures look better. They must not alter their photographs on the computer or in the darkroom, like take an ugly telephone pole out of a picture. The photojournalist must also tell the truth, just like the reporter. 77

[The] unsupervised approach may be even more of a problem with photography, because the meaning of an image can be manipulated through use in a false context, or no context at all. In the looting that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime there were photographs of US soldiers with arms full of money taken off the looters they had arrested, and which they were returning to an appropriate location. The same photographs could represent responsible people attempting to restore law and order, or ruthless invaders plundering the country that was their victim, your choice, depending on who you are and where you are. With technology enabling even the most unskilled amateur to take good quality photographs such misrepresentations are likely to occur more frequently. Not only will there be a greater number of images of any given event, but once they're on the

Internet they will be readily available to anyone with an agenda.

Furthermore, amateur photographers don't have the same training as professional photojournalists, nor have they acquired the same experience and instincts. 78

This professionalism, experience, and instinct is what ensures the existence of the photojournalist well into the future. Reportage has occurred since the dawn of printed news, yet seldom is the place of the professional print journalist questioned. This is in spite of the fact that ordinary citizens sometimes have greater or more immediate access, and that many people carry pencils and paper (the tools of the print journalist's trade). In the world of written journalism, professional journalists (who are bound by their own ethics) cull quotations from non-journalists. Absent blogs, nobody asks citizens to write whole news articles about what they witness. In other words, though recently The New York Times ran a camera phone image that was taken by a "citizen photojournalist" on its front page, it is doubtful that they