

Documentary practice



Documentary practice is the method of creating documentary information to explain or help others observe historical or current events. In the middle of the 1950s industrial developments made film and then video more convenient and inexpensive therefore allowing more people to be involved in the practice of documenting. An example of this would be an ordinary citizen being able to capture the political world as changing events occurred with his camcorder, transforming him from a witness to an amateur documentary filmmaker. For example, the infamous 1991 video of Rodney King being subjected to excessive police restraint is an early example of the continuing power of the ordinary citizen's ability to have a real impact on documentary practice.[1]

Documentary practice is therefore deemed to be a reference to what we create with media technology, substance, type, and manufacture strategies in conjunction to deliver the creative, ethical, and conceptual problems and choices that arise as they make documentary films or photographs or other comparable presentations based on fact or reality.

Today we have a vast expanse of new media technology available to us to continually restructure documentary practices in considerable way.

Recording technologies implanted within portable devices, for example hand-held digital video cameras, video-equipped mobile phones and still cameras, have made it achievable for large numbers of us to connect within citizen's journalism and the "documentary practice."

By allowing other people to trace and share their experiences, all the up-and-coming media technologies produced are transforming the ways in which

people document facts and also how they contribute to the actual events that they are documenting. Daily life can become a performance as these people respond to events and encounter new experiences through documentary practices, creating reports of those events, which they can then go and share with others all over the globe via the Internet. For a lot of people, digital media becomes a form of documentary practice when they are created for and then shared via social-networking sites like Twitter, Flickr and Facebook.

A recent example of documentary photography being available to all is the footage of a US Airways plane Flight 154, with 155 people on board landing in the Hudson River. It was brought to the world's attention even before the mainstream media delivered the information, immediately posted online for everyone to see.

An image is a document of something that happens for a split second in that moment of exposure. From this point of view no photograph is less of a form of documentation than any other. However one could disagree with the view that photography is of that moment and therefore faithful and an unmediated show of the physical world which we live in. This could have been true if not for the digital camera. We now all take for granted the process for turning what we see into an image and how easy they are to alter or manipulate. Photographs still remain the only form of evidence, which is still accepted in the courtroom but how can this be when we have examples of edited photos like this of the 'Model Evolution With Makeup And Photoshop'. What used to be a global trust in the truth of images has now been lost.

During the 1980s, the children of the postmodern documenting movement, Sontag, Berger, and company, transformed this skepticism of the truth of photography, especially that of documentary, into outright antipathy.

Certainly, for the postmodern, distrust of the photograph took an ethical stance, although this was seen as closer to pathological. In the belief of these critics, the photograph was merely a tool of late capitalism, exploiting its subject matter and duping its viewer. Consequently, Abigail Solomon-Godeau charged that the documentary photo-or what she splendidly referred to it as "the regime of the image"- commits a "double act of subjugation"[2] in which the unlucky subject is persecuted firstly by the social forces, the act that they have been done wrong by, to put them in the position of having their picture taken in the first place, then by the photographer and viewer.

There are not only the masculine and feminine gazes, black and white gazes, gay and straight gazes, but also the political, artistic, the negative and positive gazes. Therefore can society as a whole have a gaze? Considering the individuality of the arrangement and attitude of the onlooker, is it vital to understanding the labor of visual sociologists? This is all discussed in the well-appointed essay on documentary photography by Abigail Solomon Godeau, 'Who is Speaking Thus?' from the book 'Photography at the Dock'.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau talks about Jacob Riis in her essay, asserting that in Jacob's images he does not exploit his subject with the return of a glance. She argues that by not identifying his subject he has refused a personal attachment, yet leaving his spectator within a social unrest. However this is still remains an exploitation within status, as a pictorial spectacle usually targeted for a different audience and a different class, giving the collections

of images the name 'How The Other Half Live'. His photographs became a larger enterprise of power of surveillance, containment and social control due to threats posed to the American by the large numbers of poor, unassimilated immigrants, aiming to leave the rich in a specter of social control. John Tagg went further by stating that documentary photography is 'ultimately a function of the state,' deeply implicated in the ruling class's 'apparatus of ideological control' and its "reproduction of submissive labour power." It was not art photographers who incited the anger or fashion photography but instead socially deliberate photojournalists, with their confidence in conventional fictions as growth and truth.

Martha Rosler, quoted, "Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy."

Martha Rosler is confirming the understanding that photojournalists, although believing that their acts of photography are for the aid of understanding and recording are victimizing their subject and taking control of their misfortune. By photographing images such as "migrant agricultural worker's family, 1936, by Dorothy Lange" staging the image to come across a certain way. Lange took these images for a project called Farm security administration, which was a large scale, federally funded propaganda machine initially conceived to foster support for New Deal relief programs. The subjects were told to stage a somber pose, they were not allowed to wear their best clothes but forced to put on their everyday rags and not to wash their faces or hands for the photo. Those photographers like Walker Evans, who did not abide to these rules and had their aesthetic agendas did not fare well at the F. S. A.

This image by Dorothy Lange is a perfect example of Abigail's essay on "who is speaking thus?" It is an image of a woman who looks hard done by, struggling, her face looks lost but yet is looking out in what we presume to be farmland as if there is hope out there for her. She has selected with an unerring eye. You do not find in her portrait gallery the bindle-stiffs, the drifters, the tramps, the unfortunate, and the aimless dregs of society.

In an essay written almost 30 years after the event, entitled 'The Assignment I'll Never Forget', Dorothy then gave us her story of how she made the photograph. 'I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.'^[3]

We later find out that all of this is untrue because the photographer has edited this image; a hand was removed for the corner of the picture making you then believe it was tampered with and set up. In other words, the 'appeal was created by altering the situation to make sure the viewer was premised on the assertions that the victims of the depression were to be judged as the deserving poor, and thus claim redress hinged on individual misfortune rather than on systematic failure in the political, economic and

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social spheres.'[4] In collective with our own government agencies that embrace photographic substance, the F. S. A. gave out prints for reproduction in the every day press. In the New Deal relief program project photographers were handed set shooting scripts from which they had to work from, they didn't have possession of their negatives and also had no power over how the pictures would be set, captioned and resized so cut out certain parts of the images the F. S. A didn't agree with. The photographer's position was comparable to that of photojournalists working for the commercial press.

Soloman-Godeau is troubled with the opinionated implications of that to which the image testifies. In relation to the supposed fairness between the photographer and her subject it is importance noting that the " migrant mother" herself, Florence Thompson, was searched to her trailer home in Modesto, in California. One of the 20th century's most recognizable and revealing images was reviewed as an ordinary woman, who was poor in a routine way and now no longer possible to live life as a symbol of dignity and sorrow in the facade of poverty. Florence Thompson's image has been viewed in many different forms and in many places, and has also been copied millions of times all over the world. She was one of the most familiar figures of 1930's America during the New Deal Relief, but not until about 50 years subsequent to the event did she get to comment on it in public. She told united press that she " was proud to be the subject of the photograph, but that she had never made a penny out of it and that it had done her no good".[5]

" Realism is an issue for not only literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such"[6]

Although many of these photographs have exploited their subjects there have been cases where the subject although exploited have then seek fame from there documented situation. An example of this is the mug shots of Hugh Grant and Divine Brown. Although humiliating for Hugh Grant is gave him a lot of new opportunities, but it also opened a whole new world for Divine Brown, who became famous, almost a celebrity. The mug shot does not exploit but it also does portray a story, it only documents facts and references as evidence for the police to document crime. It is not there to make the viewer understand a story or feel sympathy. There is no one trying to speak through the image, not even the photograph. However their glance into the camera can show and convey a feeling such as Hugh Grants unease.

To think otherwise was to participate in fraud: " The wholeness, coherence, identity, which we attribute to the depicted scene is a projection, a refusal of an impoverished reality in favor of an imaginary plenitude,"[7]. In the outlook of the critics, it was unachievable to ever envisage the new world, for the gaze of the photographer and his audience was programmed by ideological forces beyond our own power; we are all simply caught in capitalism's web, which none of us can sadly escape. As John Berger would mention, " unlike there late master, some of Barthes' structuralism followers love the closed systems". Yet certainly, Victor Burgin condemned the actual activity of looking as an odd stance, for a photography critic: " Our conviction that we

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are free to choose what we make of a photograph hides the complicity to which we are recruited in the very act of look." [8] He insisted these critics regard the photographs as a confinement and the ability of vision as a crime.

There is a perception of photographs as containing 'reality', a service that disappears over time, so that its primary intricacy gives way to the iconic. The community does not need reminding of the strength of images. A power that also includes their capability to go beyond the unique impulse of their construction like that of the disconcerting image telling of the 'Migrant Mother', told and retold which inevitable offers, with severe poignancy, an common display of discourse as a depository of understanding and meaning. The photograph has as much as it's destroyed history portrays a story of, a woman, her children, a photographer, a government bureau, a popular magazine and a changing public. All of which contribute to an image to give it meaning and a form a depth. Inevitably it is " an image and tail composed, revised and re-issued in various venues until whatever reality its subjects first possessed is drained away." [9]

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