

Documentary Photography:

Questions of Truth

Ryan L. Moule

Documentary Photography has a strong relationship with the notion of Truth. Many people consider this notion simply bound up with the integrity of the photographer. We will look at the foundations of this discourse in more detail, specifically studying the relationship between photographer and subject.

Do this by looking at 3 things;

1. History of Documentary Photography
2. Problematics of the Documentary tradition
3. Methods used by Contemporary Documentary Photographers

1. History of Documentary Photography :

The term 'Documentary' was coined in the 1930's by Film maker John Grierson. Until then the distinction between Documentary and any other kind of photography was seen as unnecessary, as ALL photographs were considered to be Documents.

Victorian photographers went in search of the exotic to photograph; the strange and the unfamiliar, which cemented the structure of looking at the 'Other' (anyone/thing that was not Victorian White Male Upper/Middle class).

From the beginning of the 20th century the (Documentary) photograph (assumed truth) was placed in opposition with (Hollywood) cinema/film (fiction).

2. Problematics of Documentary Tradition :

Reality Effect :

From its very beginnings, the photograph has been linked to the notion of the 'Real'. Remember Fox Talbot's term 'the *Pencil of Nature*' and his insistence of the indexical link between the photograph and the object.

The case of Dr Banardo (Liz Wells, 2000, p. 76-77) raised a distinction between Actual or Symbolic authenticity, and it was realised that 'authenticity' came from the photographer not the technology.

Roland Barthes talks about the 'Reality Effect' – as if the image made itself at the time of taking; as if it is self-generated. The photographer is always outside of the field of view (own shadow or camera bag in the frame is a no no). There is a convergence of the Photographers, Cameras and Spectators EYE which 'Confers on the photograph a quality of pure, but delusory (imagined) presentness' (Barthes). As if the viewer is there – seeing what the photographer sees.

Over time, Documentary Photography has established certain codes, which might be considered a 'documentary rhetoric';

- The printing of the black borders (showing the whole frame – not leaving anything out).
- Black & White (connotes integrity) but a factor of reproduction.
- Graininess (gritty, serious, hard hitting) practical use of fast film.

- 35mm (discrete, observed, glancing, objective) but portable easy to use.

Power over the Other : Jacob Riis turned camera into the darkness and looked at the poor as subjects. The structure of the 'poor subject' as the 'Other' ('the poor' as victims) marked the beginning of a trend, which resulted in society connecting poor people with issues of crime, delinquency, and hopelessness. Making the image of the poor inseparable from social problems. Anthropology and Documentary Photography share a common Colonialist history Since the '60's Western

Anthropology has been trying to re-invent itself – from 'SPEAKING FOR' Others, to 'SPEAKING ABOUT' or 'SPEAKING WITH'. Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves, and Documentary Photography has also tried to change its position.

Cropping : Photographers often focus largely on individual subjects – using them as metonymic (parts of a whole) for the conditions which produced the victim. The *causes* of poverty are not often visual and not going to make 'good photos'. Photography is good at fragments (individuals, objects, etc.) not collectivity (the whole) – it crops by its nature. So individuals become symbolic for a larger subject but without actually showing that subject. But symbolism often gets lost in translation and we become caught up in the sympathy of the outcome rather than scrutinising the cause – the political. Which is why documentary photography is so acceptable, politically – it examines the surface of society but doesn't shake the foundations.

"If the concern is poverty why not stop transforming the poor into

icons of pity and explore it's causes, that is, examine the sources of economic power and display the lifestyle of those who profit from inequalities." Ruby, Jay 'Sharing the Power', *Perspectief* (No. 41. 1992) p.15.

Voyeuristic :

Photojournalism has often been criticised for being voyeuristic and exploiting the poor for the creation of images for aesthetic consumption. The system of 'division' that the camera operates under (everything is always 'over there') will always keep the subject matter at a distance – therefore it can never really shock the viewer, but it is always possible to find pleasure in the image.

3. Contemporary photographers:

With the demise of both the colonialist era and dominant role of the white middle-class, heterosexual, male as centre of meaning, the question arises as to the right to represent anyone but yourself. A more reflexive stance where the producer of the knowledge (Images) is responsible for the knowledge he/she constructs (which is why a photographer shouldn't reject theory).

After the war, the emphasis became about self-expression, that photographs were not indisputable facts but subject to influence by photographers' politics. The photographer / subject relationship then becomes even more important. Here we can look at photographers who demonstrate certain shifts in documentary practice since the 1960's.

- Robert Frank – the Americans : Outsider (Swiss) photographing

Inside America.

- Josef Koudelka – Exiles : Outsider (exiled from Czechoslovakia) photographing ‘Outsideness’.
- Martin Parr – Small World : Parr travels the world, not in search of the exotic Other, but photographs the British on holiday

There is a problem in that the ‘Other’ are seen as ‘having to’ be represented ‘on their behalf’. The traditional approach to documentary photography believes that, as technical skills of film and photography are ‘difficult’ it is in ‘everyones best interest’ that the production remains in the hands of the professionals. More conceptual approaches to photography are contesting these aesthetic doctrines. But many artists and commercial professionals continue the MYSTIFICATION of the technology arguing that only highly trained, sensitive individuals can produce good photographs.

Documentary Photography has come under harsh scrutiny from Postmodern criticism, which questions its tendency to separate and marginalize groups of people; serving up the poor as exotic fare for comfortable voyeurs. The reinvention of a Documentary Photography which tries to locate a speaking position that grants them some political and moral legitimacy (e.g. Alfredo Jarr or Nick Waplington). The role of professional Documentary Photographers as an Outsider looking at an Others culture will disappear because it is unnecessary. The ‘Other’ will have their own methods of representation.

‘Documentarians will have to learn to share their power to represent or they may loose it altogether.’ (Jay Ruby, Perspective, No. 41)

The subject of the following sessions will look at the issues raised so far and question how contemporary documentary photographers have tackled such problems.

Some other photographers work to look at in this context might be; Lee Friedlander, Paul Graham, Paul Seawright, Anna Fox, Nick Waplington, Richard Billingham, Boris Mikhailov, Elina Brotherus, Nan Goldin and Jacqueline Hassink.