2 Documentary expression and photography

Before we go deeper into the French humanist paradigm it will be helpful to consider a further aspect of the representational issues which photography raises. We need to resolve certain questions about the 'truth-value' of the 'documentary' images produced by those working within the paradigm.

There is a central ambiguity within photography: 'depending on whether the mind or the eye is struck by its capacities to record or express, it is regarded now as a tool of documentation, now as an instrument of creation' (Lemagny in Lemagny and Rouillé, 1987, p.12). This problem derives from the invention of the photographic medium which was conceived as was so much else in the nineteenth century as a process which would reconcile art and industry. It will be helpful to consider certain of the meanings and uses of the 'documentary' aspects of photography, the senses in which a photographic image can be seen as either representing some important fact or as a means of recording an event, place, person or object in ways which have an 'objective' quality.

It is important to distinguish between at least two definitions of the term *documentary* which are pertinent to the dominant paradigm of photography we are concerned with in this chapter: *documentary as objective representation* vs. *documentary as subjective interpretation.*

2.1 Documentary as objective representation

Let us take first the idea of documentary as simply relating to *documents* of some sort (in this case *photographic* images). In this context, the image is normally referred to as a sort of impersonal 'legal proof', an objective record, similar in nature to an official form, a letter, a will, etc. It has purely informational value.

In so far as the image is merely a simple record (i.e. a photographic reproduction of a letter, a painting, an object, a building, a scene, a passport portrait of a person, etc.), its factual or objective basis seems at first glance quite unexceptional. Like a letter or an object itself, the photograph is held to be an **objective representation** of something factual, the image a way of presenting 'facts' about its subject in a purely informational way. But complications begin to seep in to this apparently clear-cut notion of the photographic 'document', and they concern exactly how and on what authority the record is held to divulge its objectivity. Like all documentary records, photographic documents may of course be altered in order to offer a false or different interpretation from that which they would disclose if they had not been tampered with. But this is not at issue. What we are concerned with is the general belief that photography is an *inherently* objective medium of representation. This belief has grown up with the medium and it is still

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routinely in play whenever we open a book or magazine or newspaper. The historian Beaumont Newhall put it most succinctly when he argued that 'the photograph has special value as evidence or proof'. We believe it because we believe our eyes.

As John Berger has pointed out, photography emerged (during the 1830s) at a time when the philosophy of positivism was also moving into its heyday, and the two developed alongside each other. In essence (and simplifying enormously), positivism held that science and technology advanced our capacity to understand the physical and social world through the acquisition of factual knowledge (Berger, 1982, p. 99). Photography, as a modern technology – the combination, as David Hockney once memorably put it, of a renaissance drawing instrument and nineteenth-century chemistry – provided a tool whose seemingly objective mechanism for trapping factual representations fitted precisely within this positivist philosophy. Yet this understanding of photography was not in fact 'given' with the emergence of the medium.

When photography appeared in the 1830s, it was initially seen not as a primarily scientific tool but as an essentially creative medium, as summed up in Edouard Manet's remark on seeing the first photographs: 'from today, painting is dead'. Early uses of photography concentrated on landscape and portraiture, both modes of representation until then considered typical of painting and drawing, neither of which were considered as inherently 'objective' modes of representation in the scientific connotations of the term.

The great advantage of photography for its inventors – aptly summed up in Fox Talbot's term 'photogenic drawing' – was that it provided a technological solution to the manual problems posed by the 'quest for resemblance' which dominated western art. Treatises on art from antiquity until the eve of the twentieth century gave an important role to the concept of *imitation*. However, this was not to be a merely slavish reproduction of nature:

> An artistic work should introduce the soul into a world governed by supreme truth and ideal beauty. Often the artists could accomplish this only at the cost of exactitude: one example out of many is provided by the extra vertebrae given to Ingrès's *Odalisque*, painted in 1814. The transcription of reality was not an objective undertaking but a means, available to man alone, of using the work which he produced or contemplated to establish a correlation with a world of infinity. Essentially, an image was the product of a mental effort: whether figurative or abstract, it constituted the substance of the only iconographical system that existed before 1839, the system generically known as 'the arts of drawing'.
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> (Lemagny in Lemagny and Rouillé, 1987, p. 13)

As photography gradually supplanted the earlier iconographical system founded on the arts of drawing, a whole series of transactions occurred which placed its modes of representation within new iconographic frameworks. Technological and aesthetic developments saw the uses of the medium extend into many domains. As a result, a series of 'paradigms' of photographic representation emerged, each of which offered a particular vision of the world which photography could take within its remit. These included various artistic-aesthetic movements in which the expressive power of the photographic image was held to be of central value. However, this was in opposition to the emergence of a dominant paradigm, underpinned by a *reflective* approach to representation, which asserted that the photograph offered a 'true image' of the world. The 'camera eye' was considered to be like a 'mirror held up to Nature'. The emergence and eventual dominance of such a paradigm in the nineteenth century helped the new medium become an integral part of the processes of industrialization, of scientific development and of social control/surveillance (Tagg, 1988, pp. 5–8). In this new paradigm of visual representation, the photographic image acquired truth-value. A photograph was seen as *inherently* objective (because of its combination of physical and chemical technology). The camera produced *visual facts* or *documents*. Thus, the very practice of photography could be said to offer a *documentary objectivity* to the images which it created.

2.2 Documentary as subjective interpretation

The second definition of documentary is in many ways richer but less apparently clear-cut, and deals with the more social and personal aspects of the term – as when we speak of something being a 'human document'. Examples might include a journal or diary, someone's written account of their experiences, a 'documentary' film about a person's life, a picture story in a magazine. In this context, the document's informational value is mediated through the perspective of the person making it, and it is presented as a mixture of emotion *and* information. Indeed, it is in creating images which have the power to move the viewer, to retain their attention through the presentation of a telling image, that this form of *documentary* works. Edward Steichen described the work of a group of photographers who recorded the rural and urban changes which America underwent from 1935 to 1943 as a body of images which struck the viewer by their dramatic verisimilitude: 'it leaves you with a feeling of a living experience you won't forget' (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 11). Roy Stryker, who led the group referred to by Steichen, argued that 'good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or person *looks* like, but it must also tell the audience what it would *feel* like to be an actual witness to the scene' (ibid., p. 29). One of the photographers in Stryker's team, Arthur Rothstein, underpinned these ideas when he formulated his belief that 'the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print' (ibid., p. 29) – with the implication that the two are interchangeable, so that the viewer is in effect 'there' when the shutter clicked.

You may note in reading what follows that what I describe as **subjective interpretation** in this section sits rather awkwardly between Chapter 1's categories of *reflective* and *intentional* representation. However, it is difficult to disentangle such conceptual distinctions from the practices and statements of documentary photographers, as the discussion below makes clear, for the subjective mode of 'documentary' representation became *paradigmatic* during the 1930s and 1940s and has remained influential until the present day within illustrative reportage photography, or 'photo-journalism'. William Stott, in his classic study (1973) of the emergence of this mode of representation in 1930s' America, makes the point that during that period the idea was forged that the documentary nature of a work gained force from its association with the individual 'real' experience of its author. The authenticity which derives from the sense of 'being there' conveyed a special truth-value to works which could claim they were fashioned from experience.

subjective interpretation

This form of 'documentary' gained currency in photography with the rise of the mass illustrated magazines in the 1930s, but it should be pointed out that its general form was also evident in other genres such as film and books, where the idea of documentary as objectively grounded but subjectively constructed interpretation was widely used – as in famous examples such as John Grierson's film *Night Mail* (1936) or James Agee's and Walker Evans's book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1965/1941), or even John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1966/1938). Such ideas have come to infuse documentary photography. As Marianne Fulton has written:

> Photojournalism is intertwined with the major events of the twentieth century. Indeed, the public's judgements about historical and contemporary incidents are often based on the photographs available to show them. It is a powerful medium, capable of focusing attention on the significant issues of our time; its descriptive ability is no less than that of words. As critic A.D. Coleman wrote, 'We are becoming visually sophisticated enough as a culture to realize that photography is not a transcriptive process but a descriptive one'. Despite the increasing awareness that depiction does not embody truth itself, photography remains a principal medium for our understanding of the world. This trust and expectation give special significance to a two-dimensional medium, which in reality can only record the outward appearance of things. That it succeeds in seeming to go beyond the surface is a testament to our acceptance of its verisimilitude and the individual insight of the photographer. As a consequence, just as the Civil War became a shockingly real encounter through the work of Matthew Brady's studio, so photojournalism still provides important access to both feeling and facts.
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> Photojournalists, in the photographic tradition of Brady, are more than spectators in an historical grandstand. Being there is important, being an eyewitness is significant, but the crux of the matter is bearing witness. To

> bear witness is to make known, to confirm, to give testimony to others. The distribution and publication of the pictures make visible the unseen, the unknown and the forgotten.
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> ... in Europe the coming of the smaller camera influenced photographers' style and manner of working, and this in turn had an impact on picture editors' approach to magazine layout. At the same time, the rise of Hitler forced many of the prominent photojournalists to relocate, sending them to France, England and subsequently the United States. The migration would have a profound effect on photojournalism. The European 35mm, candid style soon challenged the traditional large format work of American newspapers.
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> In the United States newly developed printing methods allowed for large, high-quality magazines based on European models. Especially important in the days before television, the magazines, such as *Life* and *Look,* became a sort of national newspaper showing labour strife, political figures, and world conflicts. In the 1930s, as in other eras, technology, the picture-making it facilitated, and the world-wide political situation combined to shape our ideas of photojournalism and the world it pictured. One writer was moved to say, 'All hell broke loose in the '30s and photography has never been the same since'. While referring to changes in camera design and specifically to the Leica, the quote aptly encapsulates the flux of events.
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> Because photojournalism is of the moment, it presents a sense of continual present, which in turn conditions our expectations of the medium and thereby defines the course of technological experimentation. For example, in the 1930s anticipation that photographs and stories could be published together resulted in the achievement of commercially transmitting photographs over telephone lines or radio waves, bringing the world into everyone's home.
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> (Fulton, 1988, pp. 106–7)

As Fulton makes clear, the 'documentary' nature of photographic journalism, whether for a newspaper, magazine or book, is essentially *interpretative.* The representations that the photographer produces are related to his or her personal interpretations of the events and subjects which he or she chooses to place in front of the camera lens. However, they are also assumed to have some 'truth-value' in the sense that they allow the viewer privileged insight into the events they depict.

There is thus a *double* process of construction at work here. First, the photographer is involved in a process of construction in choosing and framing his or her images so as 'to make known, to confirm, to give testimony to others'. Through the photographer's construction of their existence at a given moment of time and space, subjects (for instance 'ethnically cleansed' refugees in Bosnia) who have no opportunity to speak directly to people

outside their immediate area are provided with the chance of 'giving testimony' to the readers of a newspaper or magazine. This occurs through the 'distribution and publication' of a photographer's pictures, which, as Fulton argues, makes 'visible the unseen, the unknown and the forgotten'. But this is, in other words, to pass through a *second* process of construction, where the photographs are then selected out from their original ordering and narrative context, to be placed alongside textual information and reports in a publication. Their selection, placing and framing, their connection with the content of the text, their captioning, all provide ample evidence that the meanings available to the viewer/reader on the basis of a documentary photograph are a complex representational *construction* in the sense discussed in the previous chapter.

The fact that the constructed nature of photographic social documentary relies upon more than mere visual fact-collection is also implied more directly in Fulton's contention that 'photojournalism still provides important access to both *feeling* and facts' (my emphasis). Thus, those photographers who define themselves as working within the dominant humanistic paradigm of documentary reportage would tend to associate themselves with an early exponent of the genre, the American Lewis Hine, when he said 'I wanted to show things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated' (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 21). It is significant that Hine had been a sociologist before adopting photography, because he believed that the camera would be a mightier weapon than the pen against poverty: 'if I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera' (ibid., p. 30).

The socially ameliorative strain running through photographic social documentary (evident today, for instance, in the work of the Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado, who undertakes lengthy and widely published projects on global social issues such as famine, manual labour and migration) reminds us again of the essentially constructionist form of representation on which it draws. Yet part of the power of such work – its ability to influence the perceptions of the viewer – derives from the ambiguity of the photographic representation itself, the notion that the images so produced are not the product of a human brain but of an impersonal 'camera eye'. Lewis Hine felt that the camera was 'a powerful tool for research' because it mechanically re-creates reality as crafts such as writing or painting never can (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 31). Another American photographer working on social documentary in the 1930s, Margaret Bourke-White, argued that 'with a camera the shutter opens and closes and the only rays that come in to be registered come directly from the object in front'. By contrast, writing was clearly less objective to her: 'whatever facts a person writes have to be coloured by his prejudice and bias' (ibid., pp. 31–2). Though such a binary opposition (photography = objectivity: writing = bias) is completely unsustainable, Bourke-White's statement none the less underlines the point that the representations

available through photography are qualitatively different from those available through writing. Photography deals with the images of real people, whereas writing is made of words: the photograph seems closer to lived experience than words ever can be. This tends to privilege the photographic image over the written word for many viewers, and therefore underpins its claim to documentary objectivity. Although few of us now believe that 'the camera never lies', the apparent objectivity of the camera-produced image may help to fix the meaning of a given text, by providing it with a *representational legitimacy*. Thus, the association of the photographer's interpretative grasp of his or her subject with the ostensibly objective photographic image secures a status for the work of documentary which places it beyond mere opinion.

If such ambiguities are indeed in play when we look at a work of social documentary photography, they derive from two aspects of the process of representation. First, they are inherent in the practice of social documentary photographers who in 'witnessing' events on our behalf are by their own accounts typically also concerned with showing us, in Hine's words, 'the things that ha[ve] to be corrected [and] the things that ha[ve] to be appreciated'. It is worth pointing out that the idea of the 'committed photographer' – a classic contemporary example being Sebastiao Salgado – is enshrined as a role-model amongst documentary photographers. Secondly, the ambiguities also derive from the mode of presentation of such images – either in the form of pictures used to illustrate magazine or newspaper articles, or as the material of books. In both cases, there may be more or less textual support for the images – from a detailed essay to simple captions. But the general and implicitly objective nature of the images made by the mechanical process of the 'camera eye' confers a truth-value on the documentary idiom. The very act of publishing images which have a self-consciously documentary purpose – *You Have Seen Their Faces*, *An American Exodus*, *A Night in London*, *Vietnam Inc.*, *Forbidden Land*, *La Banlieue de Paris*, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*: the titles of some notable books in this genre – invites the reader to enter the process by which the representation of their subjects is constructed (Calder and Bourke-White, 1937; Lange and Schuster Taylor, 1939; Brandt, 1938; Jones-Griffiths, 1971; Godwin, 1990; Cendrars and Doisneau, 1949; Salgado, 1993). The reader engages with the work as a body of images which aim to disclose a deeper truth – about, to take the works cited above, the Depression in American, about street life in 1930s' London or 1940s' Paris, about the Vietnam war, about access to the English countryside, about the nature of labour-intensive industry. Far from being a mere recitation of visual facts, social documentary turns out to be a mode of representation deeply coloured by ambiguities, and generally representative of the paradigm in which it has been constructed.