

Redefining Documentary Photography

Written by Pedro Meyer



When presenting some of my digital pictures, I am frequently confronted with the comment: "but

surely this is not a documentary photograph, is it?"

Before we move on to respond, let us first establish hopefully with some degree of clarity what we understand by a documentary photograph. 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.

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.

Let us explore today, the parallels between photography and other forms of documentary work. For instance, a journalist brings together his writings, which represent a synthesis of what the journalist saw and/or heard, above all by what he imagines are the lines of reason behind the information selected. 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.

A documentary filmmaker does not just shoot film or video without some sort of editing process in mind. We only assume that the actors are not hired, that they are real life characters, and that the settings are also real life environments rather than constructed sets. Of course one can go on from profession to profession related to documentary work, and you will always find the same sort of rationale; the belief that the representation was based on real life situations and that the information however real still had to be processed and edited before it was presented to the public.

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 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? If anything is different it's because in the past we could not reasonably edit photography in the way we can today, so when the tools first appeared that empowered us to do so, everyone just ran for the exits. All those other

mediums had always been edited and were malleable to the nth degree; photography in that sense, was less flexible. Not that one could not alter documentary images, just ask the Soviets about all that they did in this respect. I sustain that photography always lived a life of false pretenses. Today when we intend to remove that disguise all sorts of defense lines are drawn.

Of course photography can lead to deception, it always could. What is more, it's open-ended nature in so far as meaning goes, has always been used to support whatever the intentions of the photographer. The digital age has not rushed in an avalanche of alterations as some would have thought would be the case. If one looks around what is being produced under the name of photographs one will discover that these are mostly illustrations. Another category that has grown recently is that of expanding the realm of the "fantastic" again with no attachment to the real world. What is less evident however is the work that is being produced that looks like traditional photographs but created with untraditional methods, namely digital ones. The reason for this is quite obvious: unless you are willing to offer the recipe for how you made the image, no one can really tell what was done (provided it was done well). That is what makes people so nervous and unwilling to consider as documentary an image produced digitally.

Let us look at the cover of ZoneZero this month. We decided that the title for this image would be: "Where is the Money?" (Which in Spanish has a double entendre that is quite nice, as the title "A dónde está la Lana" is based on "lana" meaning at the same time money as well as wool, for instance that of the sheep in the background). And the title "Where is the Money" also brings us back to that famous sentence by Cuba Gooding Jr. asking Tom Cruise repeatedly: "Where is the Money?" in the film Jerry Maguire (1996) . Or in looking at the image one could also recollect that other famous phrase; "Greed is Good" by Michael Douglas in the film, WallStreet (1987). For me it was interesting to relate such "first world" movie sentences to a reality in the "third world". I guess that when it comes to some basic human attitudes we are all universal.

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Interesting questions arise by the juxtaposition of the man showing us the money. Why does he put up that money? Is he asking us to pay for something? Is he doing so because he wants money for being photographed? Is he selling us some sheep meat? Does he think he needs to pay for his photograph? What is the relation of power in that encounter between the photographer and the subject and as an extension us the viewers? What role do the sheep represent in all of this? Are they symbolic of something other than their physical presence?

Let us now evaluate the elements, which compose the image. First is the issue of the origin of the parts used. In this case the two main elements are the man holding the money and the background image with the sheep being skinned. Both pertain to the same place and were taken in contiguous moments in time. They belong together as it were, as they have their common roots of space and time in a small village in Ecuador where I took the pictures. The only thing that did not occur in the final picture is that they appeared visually as they are presented here.

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While documentary photography is often seen as a straightforward way of capturing reality, it is in fact a complex and often controversial practice. The photographer's choice of subject, framing, and timing can all influence the viewer's perception of the events being documented. This is why documentary photography is often used to challenge dominant narratives and to give voice to marginalized communities.

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<http://zonezero.com/editorial/abril00/afolium.html>