



In the context of new ways of producing, disseminating and reading photographic images, it is increasingly difficult to establish precise borders or frontiers among the types, techniques, interpretations, intentions or readings of photography. When we speak of documentary work, of which photographs are we not speaking? Does an image lose its documentary character because of the simple fact that it has been constructed? How can we establish the basic characteristics that define documentary photography? Is this method of photography a collection of certificates of authenticity? Is the non-documentary photograph nothing more than a heap of lies?

The pillars that long sustained the philosophy and ethics of photography are changing, the advent of digital photography has accelerated the ethical discussions about the manipulation, and the truth, of images. This reformist wave has arrived in the pages of newspapers and magazines. At the same time, photographers are increasingly aware of the authorial nature of their work, even though it has to do with a concrete, direct task: informing. On the other hand, authors who never pretended to give their images an informational character have joined documentary territory through their photographs of themselves or their close surroundings. Such is the case with Nan Goldin, the photographer hung on these walls and winner of the Mother Jones prize.

Speaking of straight photography no longer serves to define the term "documentary." For example, in the ultimate analysis Joel Peter Witkin uses straight photography and very few people would think of mentioning him as one of the great exponents of documentary work. Photojournalists increasingly elaborate complicated sets or abstractions to achieve weighty images that, when they are published in magazines and newspapers, can not be mistaken as anything other than documentary. Newspapers take advantage of photomontage to explain an event and their readers, even though they are perfectly conscious that they are looking at a collage, have no doubts about assigning credibility to these graphic documents. Parenthetically speaking, this style in the hands of Joseph Renau or Lola Alvarez Bravo is, without a doubt, an efficient ideological instrument that reflects highly concrete political and social situations. That is to say, they document the reality of their moment from a constructed foundation, from quotations, from the unreal.

Neither can we define documentary photography as that which hews to a rigorous technical orthodoxy, because documentary photography is experimental. It uses the most sophisticated

technology or primitive cameras, carrying photographic materials to their limits or doing without them. Everything mixes and combines. We find images that were taken in the most traditional ways, prints made on amate paper by computerized injections of ink, or images taken by digital cameras through electronic processes that are distributed within the classic frame of the newspaper. Essays by realists exaggerate the grain and the use of selenium to create dramatic effects. They photograph with films produced through high technology to obtain maximum definition and minimum grain, but using throw-away plastic cameras. They document using the cameras and aesthetics of the amateur. They create essays about small towns or communities that are widely published on the global village of the Internet. The decisive moment of Cartier-Bresson, is, in many instances, a computer command. And, of course, a lot of documentary photography is done with a Leica or a Nikon and gelatin silver prints using chemical processes.

Can we then find a definition in the elemental materials of photography? Is reality as a subject the key? One of the ways that we have always understood this photography is as that which registers only what occurs, without getting in the way of or influencing the course of relations and situations that appear before us; as that photography which testifies how things happen. Robert Doisneau, master and pillar of direct photography only recently emerged from a scandal after it was discovered that one of his images (an image that had nearly become a monument), "The Kiss," was a staged photo. This photograph, that even bears the marks of "improvisation" and of having been taken "on the fly" -- such as movement, the out-of-focus foreground and elements that stain the composition -- was planned, directed, and staged by professional actors. This became public and in hardly any way has it affected the myth that surrounds it as a representation of an epoch, a sentiment, and, of course, a great documentary photograph.

Another of the monsters from which many have learned, Eugene Smith, lit and staged many of his photographs. The most famous of the reportorial photographs he took of Minamata, such as the one of the child being bathed by his mother, an image that can not help recalling Michelangelo's Pieta, are example enough to prove this point. Of course, this does not deny that these photographs are the product of reality. What I mean to say is that they are not reality and that this distinction is not exclusive to documentary photography. Constructed photographs are also based in reality, refer to it, and try to explain it.

On the road to a definition, we arrive on the grounds of the circulation and reception of the work. Does the key lie there? I don't presume to declare which space is the most natural for documentary photography. I don't know if it is best seen in the print media or in galleries. What I do know is that, without a doubt, as the context of the reading changes the sense of the message also changes. A photograph surrounded by a printed history and published at a certain moment, is not the same thing as the same image hung on a wall and apparently taken out of both time and context. Most of all, it is divorced from its time; but this is not a condition exclusive to documentary photography. To the contrary. Let us imagine, for example, that the work of Pérez Butrón was published in a newspaper. Surely, not only the impact but also the message has been modified. And, of course, now that we mention this series, is there anyone who denies their reflexive intention when it comes to something so real as AIDs? Is this not a document of our time?

Everything seems to indicate that I'm in the process of saying that every photographic act is a documentary act. But that isn't true. What we can agree on is that every photograph can be read from a documentary perspective -- if we consider that they respond to uncertainties, doubts, affirmations or negations of an epoch and the particular context of the creator; that they have to do with ideologies, crises, beliefs, dreams, utopias, realities, etcetera.

Perhaps this all began when someone decided that black and white documentary photography reflected reality, without even questioning why we accept this when color is the reality. Now the idea is increasingly accepted that photography is only a representation and that, as such, it is shaded by its author. To speak here of an author, of the photography of an author, is not to speak of the signature on an image. It is not to speak of the photographer's coherent vision. It is to speak of making one's self responsible (in the same way that a writer does) for the content. To document is to interpret and communicate. To document is to be capable of perceiving and transmitting. To document is to reflect and share, to clarify by questioning, to question by affirming, to negate by showing, to help by hiding, to combat by unfolding, to understand by confronting. Documentary photography is breaking new trails in the same way as, and alongside with, communications.

If this has always been the case, the influence is now more notable because of the way in which fixed images can be disseminated. Photography has dodged what many believed to be eminent death at the hands of live communication and moving images. Fixed photography is gaining an increasingly comfortable place in the tastes of consumers of information as a medium that permits a serene, reflexive review of the event that it presents us. At the same time, recognizing the authorial nature of documentary work where the principal actor is not only the reality but also the creator, the photographer takes on an enormous level of credibility, which makes the political or ideological use of the medium possible. This, of course, without forgetting the combination and context of the publication itself. Not long ago, we debated the competition between the fixed image and the moving image. Now, it seems to me, this debate becomes secondary as means of communication become common. That includes not only these two mediums, but sound, text, direction communication through the voice, etc.

To debate the peculiarities of documentary work versus that which is not documentary (although even at this point I am not absolutely certain which is which), seems complicated to me. It reminds me of those roundtables that debated whether or not photography was an art. We can, in our all to human hunger for taxonomy, establish currents and styles, separate commercial photography from informative photography, including that which uses objects with which people work, and still life photography from that of movement. But to group photographic works as a function of whether they are documentary seems to me to be as unnatural as it is to define the term.

One of the paradigms of modern photojournalism, Sebastián Salgado, says that photography can change absolutely nothing; that the most that it can hope for is to show that some things ought to be changed. I would dare say that what this meeting should aspire to do is to sow doubts and seek paths for our work. I insist that communication changes every day, as do its definitions and frontiers. What does not change is our human necessity to understand our surroundings and our times, to respond to stimuli that are increasingly complicated, and to the

apparent "unreality" of reality.

The end of a century through which we are living, where ethnic, religious, ideological, or economic breaches are increasingly deeper and permeate any effort at getting along; where political utopias have dissolved into rubble, bringing long-standing latent hatreds out into the open; where hyper technology exists alongside hyper poverty; where confusion appears to be carrying us to an entropic situation where, in midst of chaos, we can no longer distinguish error; where the concept of reality is so limited as to define our situation as surrealistic or as one of magical realism; photography has much to do, not only by informing in accord with the march of time, but also, and above all, through the representation of this ambiguous reality that invites reflection, through analysis and creative exposition, in that, as we remember, the action of seeing is an action of thought.

I would like to close with these words from Diane Arbus: "si se observa la realidad desde bastante cerca...la realidad se vuelve fantástica." Let us understand this qualifier in an ambiguous way: as fascinating and as vain, this last being, or course, my own addition.

Translation by Mitch Snow

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Documentary Photography: The Paradox of Reality

Written by Francisco Mata Rosas
