

Beaumont Newhall, « Documentary Approach to Photography », *Parnassus*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Mar., 1938), pp. 2-6.

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There is, of course, nothing new in the appreciation of the photograph as a document. At its very birth in 1839 photography's importance in providing, with a minimum of effort, accurate visual records was advanced as one of its chief values. On this one point all were agreed, while the place of the photograph as a work of art was immediately questioned. But even those who have denied most vehemently that photography is an art do not hesitate to study the history of more accepted forms of art by means of photographic documents. Henri Delaborde, in a review of a photographic exhibition in 1856 had no good to say for the photographs produced in the name of Art, but he was enthusiastic over the photographic documents of Chartres cathedral produced by Le Secq.

I mention this particular criticism, because it is a qualitative one. Delaborde singled out the work of one man. We agree in his choice; Le Secq's series has seldom been surpassed by all the hundreds of cameramen who have visited Chartres since 1852. Yet they were not unique. They were not unique in factual content. Their technique—that of the calotype—did not permit a high resolution of detail; what is told about the physical structure of Chartres was not revealed for the first time, because lithographed documents, by the most meticulous draftsmen, had appeared previously. Le Secq's photographs are a sympathetic interpretation of Chartres. They are a direct record, not only of the carved stones, but of the photographer's emotion in viewing them. And they represent only what actually stood in front of his camera on the day in 1852 when he exposed his negatives.

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The use of the word "documentary" in connection with photography is comparatively new. Paul Gruyer in his *Victor Hugo Photographe* (Paris, Mendel, 1905) calls the camera record of Hugo's exile in Jersey which he reproduces "le premier document photographique que nous possédons sur une époque" In the N. Y. *Sun* for February 8, 1926, John Grierson spoke of Flaherty's film *Moana* as documentary. It has since been generally accepted among movie makers as defining a particular type of film which is based upon natural factual material (as opposed to artificial studio sets) presented in an imaginative and dramatic form. The greatest and most organized activity has been in Great Britain, under the leadership of John Grierson and Paul Rotha. The latter's *Documentary Film*, published by Faber & Faber in 1936 is a brilliant statement of the history and aims of the movement. The definition of documentary which Rotha offers differs markedly from the dictionary meaning; it includes qualitative and technical implications—a dramatic presentation of fact. It is thus more closely allied to the French *documentaire* as developed by Zola. Like the French writer's document-novels, these films are produced for definite sociological purposes. The doctrine is conscious. There exist, of course, films quite independent of the movement which, probably unconsciously, follow the same theories: for example many newsreels and travelogues. But by no means all, for while they are based on fact, they are not necessarily presented either in a dramatic fashion or with regard to the sociological significance of their material.

The same is true of still photography. I have discussed the meaning of documentary as used in film-making, because in this field the definition has been made articulate, and because I believe that the present popularity of the word to describe a class of still pictures has been inspired by the example of the cinema. But there is a profound difference between still and motion-picture photography. The former is primarily a spatial art; the latter a temporal one. The film is always seen as a unit; the sequence of images is prescribed, and remains uniform except for wilful cutting by exhibitors for moral or economic reasons. The still photograph, however, is seldom seen twice in the similar manner. It may be reproduced together with any other photograph, and with any caption. Therefore, while there is a unity of spirit between still and cinematic documentary, their approaches to the same problem must be through separate channels.

It is undeniable that the documentary method, as opposed to the abstract desire to produce Fine Art, has resulted in significant photographic art. The work of photographers who have attempted to interpret subject matter has usually been superior to the work of photographers who have deliberately set out to rival or equal the painter. There are, of course, brilliant exceptions to this observation. But let us examine other cases than Le Secq's.

In his catalog of Civil War photographs, Matthew B. Brady states that the photographs "represent 'grim-visaged war' exactly as it appeared," and makes no further claim. Yet these pictures of the wrack and ruin of human bodies and nature and man's creations, these penetrating portraits of the men who planned and fought and died for the Union and for the Confederacy have more esthetic content than the compositions, lighted *à la Rembrandt*, which are signed "Adam Salomon, sculpteur," or the anecdotal composite prints of H. P. Robinson, often called the father of pictorialism.

Filed away as records of explorations in the archives of the U. S. Geological Survey are photographs of the canyons that have seldom been equalled. To find the finest rendering of the infinite perspectives of the great plains of the Middle West, one must turn to the stereographs by Alexander Gardner documenting the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad.

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It is important to bear in mind that "documentary" is an approach rather than an end. Slavish imitation of the style of other workers is meaningless. Photography has suffered from imitation almost more than the other arts; various movements have been so blindly followed that the force of the original impetus has been lost. "Pictorialism" had a definite esthetic place so long as it was not practised as an end; the Photo-Secessionists at the turn of the century were genuinely creative. Yet compare the plates of Camera W or~ with the prize-winners in pictorial salons today! The followers have imitated the form and the technique, but they have omitted the spirit of the original. Just within the last few years we have seen the growth of the "candid" school from the truly amazing unposed portraits of Dr. Erich Salomon in the late twenties (O the most casual snapshot by anyone whose pocketbook can afford a miniature camera with an F /2 lens. Dr. Salomon's pictures were

correctly described by the editor of a London illustrated paper as "candid," but the majority of similar photographs deserve no such adjective.

And so it is with "documentary." Because the majority of best work has been concerned with the homes and lives of the under-privileged, many pictures of the down-and-out have been made as "documentaries." The decay of man and of his buildings is picturesque; the texture of weathered boards and broken window-panes has always been particularly delightful to photograph. Eighty years ago a critic in the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* wrote: "If asked to say what photography has best succeeded in rendering, we should point to everything near and rough." These things, taken for their picturesqueness, may and often do form photographs of great beauty. But unless they are taken with a seriously sociological purpose, they are not documentary.

The documentary photographer is not a mere technician. Nor is he an artist for art's sake. His results are often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily they are pictorial reports. First and foremost he is a visualizer. He puts into pictures what he knows about, and what he thinks of, the subject before his camera. Before going on an assignment he carefully studies the situation which he is to visualize. He reads history and related subjects. He examines existing pictorial material for its negative and positive value-to determine what must be re-visualized in terms of his approach to the assignment, and what has not been visualized.

But he will not photograph dispassionately; he will not simply illustrate his library notes. He will put into his camera studies something of the emotion which he feels toward the problem, for he realizes that this is the most effective way to teach the public he is addressing. After all, is not this the root-meaning of the word "document" (*docere*, "to teach")? For this reason his pictures will have a different, and more vital, quality than those of a mere technician. They will even be better than those of a cameraman working under the direction of a sociologist, because he understands his medium thoroughly, and is able to take advantage of its potentialities while respecting its limitations. Furthermore he is able to react to a given situation with amazing spontaneity'.

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Technically, the documentary photographer is a purist, but he does not limit himself to any one procedure. Cameras of all sizes and types have been used to make photo documents. Ideally the most suitable camera for the particular job is chosen, be it a miniature with film hardly bigger than a postage stamp, or a bulky view camera taking eight by ten inch cut film. If there is any camera which may be called universal for normal documentary work, it would be a hand-camera for cut film three-and-a-quarter by four-and-a-quarter inches, fitted with a coupled range-finder for quick, accurate focusing, and with a synchronized speed flash and shutter control, making exposures possible under any light conditions. Needless to say retouching of any kind is strictly prohibited. Since the value of a photo-document lies in the directness of its technique, any intervention of hand-work is bound to be injurious. For the same reason the negatives are printed directly onto a smooth surface paper to allow full detail to be rendered.

But the documentary approach does not stop with the print. In discussing the use of the word documentary to describe a certain class of moving pictures, we noted the importance which presentation played in the theory. Presentation is also a vital part of documentary still photography. The photograph is not valid as a document until it is placed in relationship to the beholder's experience. It is paradoxical that, although a photograph may be better than a thousand words, the addition of one or two words makes it even more concrete and forceful. Thus when Le Secq signed his negative "Chartres 1852" he immediately gave the photograph an increased value as a document. Such a simple case has no bearing on esthetic quality. But more extended captions enable the beholder to orientate himself, thus leaving the photographer free to interpret the subject more imaginatively. A better way to give this orientation is by a series of photographs, which when properly presented approach the cinema. This is the richest manner of giving photographs significance, for each picture reinforces the other. It is, I believe, the logical method of presentation. It is more-it is the logical approach to the medium. One of the striking characteristics of photography is its ease, compared with every other way of making pictures. Almost universally photographers take many exposures of a given scene, if only to make assurance doubly sure. The series is usually produced with no idea of the method of its ultimate presentation. The prints for publication are chosen by a second person, are captioned by a third, are laid out by a fourth.

If, as this article has attempted to show, creative photography can be produced by following a program of factual reporting, then the more clearly this program is conceived, the greater the results. A shooting script is as important for this type of still photography as for movie-making, and should be planned by the editor and by the photographer working together. This does not mean that every shot need be envisaged on paper, but it does mean that the photographer should be considered the creator, not simply of individual pictures, but of a related series. Trimming, quality of reproduction, its relation to text and other reproductions in size and spacing these are all as important as the photographer's work on the field and in the darkroom. The complete documentary approach includes these functions. And I believe that through this approach there can be achieved publications which, in every sense of the word, exploit the special medium of photography, and which will be significant contributions to book-making. In the German illustrated newspapers between the War and the Nazi revolution, in the Parisian *Vu* while edited by Lucien Vogel, in *Photo-History*, to a certain degree in *Life* and its imitators, occasionally in the tabloids, the possibilities are being shown. The text-books of the future will be largely pictorial; already children's books are assuming that character. Back of them all is the documentary approach to photography.