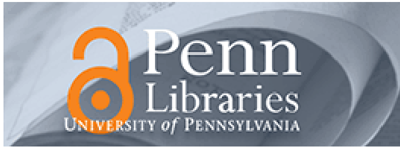

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Documentary without Ontology

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Documentary without Ontology

Joel Snyder

Of all the categories of classification and analysis used by critics and historians of photography, none seems as useful and intrinsically sensible as the class known as "documentary." And yet, for all the appeal of the "documentary" category, for all of its apparent legitimacy, there is probably no other classificatory label commonly used in the study of photography that is as difficult to define and understand. A document is etymologically and in the law an item of proof or evidence in support of a putative fact, and many photographs (some critics say all photographs) certainly seem to be concerned with facts—either putative or proved. At times, most particularly when teaching graduate seminars, I have wanted to banish the term from my vocabulary, for more than any other single term, "documentary" is responsible for the introduction of hopelessly confused philosophic and ontologic disputes that properly belong in introductory courses in metaphysics and not in classes devoted to the critical analysis of pictures in cultural, social, or esthetic contexts. While I have nothing against metaphysics in general or the study of ontology in particular, I have had sufficient exposure to these disciplines to know that they are areas of extreme complexity and subtlety best left to competent philosophers. If documentary photographs are documentary by virtue of their special relation to "the facts" they depict, then an understanding of these photographs is no longer a critical-pictorial enterprise; instead it becomes a scientific project. If documentary pictures are documentary solely because they "record the facts," then anyone who wishes to understand them ought properly to study the events, states, and processes they portray, not the pictures themselves. In more sober moods, I have wondered if, in preference to eliminating the term, it would be possible to reform it by removing a commitment to "the facts" from our notion of documentary in an effort to dentologize—to remove the mystery surrounding it while conserving its utility. An operational definition of documentary, one that emphasizes the use of certain photographs and reduces, or best of all, totally eliminates any ontological commitment on the part of the user of the term, would be a valuable addition to the vocabulary of photographic criticism and might also prove useful to anthropologists as well as art and cultural historians.

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Two Proposed Definitions of "Documentary"

Documentary in photography has been dealt with, on the whole, in one of two ways: (1) the documentary character of a photograph has been explained in terms of the nature of the medium—an explanation that has the inevitable consequence of making all photographs into documents; and (2) the documentary character of a photograph has been explained in terms of the intention of the photographer who made the picture in question. Each of these modes of explanation makes quite different claims, though at times it has been assumed that (1) and (2) somehow amount to the same thing.

The Documentary *Nature* of Photography

In the view of some critics,[1] photographs are different from handmade pictures of all kinds. When defined in terms of this opposition, handmade pictures come to be thought of as products of the imagination, while photographs are characterized as records or traces of "the world" or of "the facts of the moment" or of "the way things are." It is worth noting that this opposition fails to provide a clear classification for handmade illustrations that have a scientific use—e.g., topographical illustrations, anatomical drawings, precise sketches of the moon or of one-celled organisms seen under a microscope, and so on. This kind of scientific illustration might be accounted for as a bastard production, a work made with scientific intent but suffering from the inevitable effects of human fallibility and the unwanted presence of the human imagination. Understood in these terms, handmade scientific illustrations inevitably fail as entirely accurate pictures and are, therefore, not as credible as photographs. Obviously, in this view, handmade pictures fail to achieve complete fidelity because of the nature of human judgment and imagination, while photographs escape these flaws by being in some important sense mechanically produced. Handmade pictures use conventionally sanctioned "schemata" of illustration (as Ernst Gombrich calls them), while photographs somehow cannot avoid, are somehow "automatically" committed to, depicting the facts (and only the facts).

Posing the question about the differences between photographs and all other kinds of pictures in this way sets up the inevitable distinction between documentary and other categories of classification. Broadly speaking, in this kind of analysis, the character of a photograph is determined by insisting on the documentary character of the medium as a whole. In other words, photographs are held to be unavoidably

documentary because of the way in which they come into being. Other kinds of pictures—sketches, paintings, whatever—achieve their documentary character through the use of conventional devices that provide both the rules of depiction as well as the rules for the interpretation of what is to be depicted. Photographs in this analysis are essentially natural objects and are conventional only insofar as they have been made in keeping with some rule of "selection," that is, a rule or convention that determines the appropriate kinds of objects to photograph. Photographs thus achieve a special informative value by eliminating, insofar as possible, the kind of human agency that distorts or falsifies "the facts" depicted. A photograph gets closer to the world in inverse proportion to the quantity of human manipulation involved in its production.

Documentary Intention

Another view of documentary in photography finds the defining character of a photographic document in the motive, purpose, or intention of the photographer.[2] Here a critic need not maintain that all photographs are essentially documentary and is free, for example, to suggest that while some photographs may be made for specifically commercial or artistic reasons, others are documentary because they were made with documentary intention. The photographer's intention to make a document, to make a "record" of some particular fact or facts, is the informing principle for the photograph. A photograph made for reportorial or scientific purposes fails to secure artistic legitimacy because its production did not involve an artistic intention.[3] Photographs secure their documentary character by being the product of a specific kind of intention.

Some recent critics of traditional histories and historians of photography have centered their attention on the issue of documentary and documentary intention. They maintain that attempts to produce a coherent history of photography on the model of the history of painting provided by German art history are thoroughly misguided. These photographic-art histories generally include, among the "touchstones" of "high" photographic art, works by photographers who were engaged in various utilitarian pursuits—including, but not limited to, architectural, travel, war, commercial-industrial, scientific, and exploration photography—as well as photographs made with artistic intent. The objections to the inclusion of utilitarian works like these in an art-history of photography appear to center on issues of intentionality. While it may be that these critics would oppose any photographic-art history, the major objection against such histories appears to concern the purported illegitimacy of nominating utilitarian photographs for candidacy as works of art.[4] The issue reduces to a reasonably straightforward question: What warrant do historians have to treat utilitarian photographs as works of art when these photographs were not engendered by an art motive? Not only does no such warrant exist, but the practice of treating, say, the Western American exploration photographs of T. H. O'Sullivan as if they were works of art falsifies both the history and the photographs. It makes the photographs into something they were not and could not have been. And there is a deeper, less polemical question present here as well: To what extent does a historian distort the history of photography by imposing current categorical schemes on photographs whose maker's intentions are open to question and whose original audience's reactions are often unknown? Thus, questions regarding the pictorial character of documentary pictures are in themselves problematic, or if not that, at least suspicious. And the issue concerns the kinds of reasons we may advance on behalf of classifying a photograph in the documentary category. Beyond this, there is, of course, a much broader question: to what extent, if any, are the sorts of analyses to which a photograph may legitimately be subjected determined by the nature of the intention that produced it? The questions of classification and that of the legitimacy of different kinds of analysis are quite different and need to be kept separate.

Concerning Photographic Essence and Documentary Intention

1. Photographic Essence

Neither of the suggestions regarding the source of documentary character—that the photographic process automatically and necessarily produces documents or that the roots of documentary must be sought solely or primarily in the specific intentions of photographers—provides much insight into a variety of perplexing questions about photographic documents. At the level of analytic precision, each of these views is flawed. The supposition that photographs are inherently different from other kinds of graphics is true when considered from one limited vantage point, and then only trivially true. When taken in a way that makes an interesting claim, the assertion that photographs are different in kind from all other kinds of pictures is simply false.[5] While it is doubtless certain that photographs are different at the material level from, say, paintings, arguments asserting that photographs enjoy a special claim to accuracy, objectivity, or "world relatedness" have been unconvincing. It is far from clear to me that all photographs provide evidence or support allegations of facts. Unquestionably, some, perhaps many, do, but it stretches any useful definition of "documentary" to make all photographs into documents. The examples that best illustrate this point are, unfortunately, photographs that we tend to think of as flawed or somehow "tricky." Such examples are clearly at a rhetorical disadvantage, but it will be useful to look at one of them before looking at a more standard example.

A photograph of a tennis player completing a stroke in which the limbs are shown as grey smears fails, at least in certain ways, to be objective, accurate, or—in specifically documentary ways—informative. A common rejoinder would be that the example under discussion is in fact accurate, since the picture is the result of a series of cause and effect events that are recorded in the negative.[6] But this sort of maneuver is futile because it drains the meaning from "documentary." Even granting the supposition that the picture is, in some sense, accurate, this accuracy is purchased at the cost of scrutability. For it now turns out that any piece of film, even one exposed to ambient light and developed and printed, is an accurate picture because it "records" the play of light on a light-sensitive emulsion.

The initial claim about the accuracy of photographs achieved its plausibility by attempting to explain a view that appeals to common sense. This view was that the "object or world relatedness" of photographs made them inherently documentary. But the new explanation attempts to find the "recording" character of photographs in the ability of film to respond not to objects but to light. Thus, if we adopt this view of the light-recording character of photography, we are left with the singularly unenlightening explanation that no matter what a photograph may look like, it is a document of something: of the optical and chemical interaction of light and film. Thus, a photographic print that is little more than a uniform grey patch, even though uninformative in precisely the way documentary pictures are supposed to be informative, counts as a document because it is essentially a "record." The point of the "essentialist" position was to explain why it is that typical photographs—the kind in which we can secure the identification of all sorts of objects in the world—are inherently accurate and therefore credible. It fails because in the end it assures us that no matter what a photograph may look like, it is both accurate and credible. It fails primarily, however, because one of its basic premises is flawed: All photographs are not accurate in either the usual or even in a restricted "scientific" sense.

There is a far more important point to make about documentary in this connection, but it is difficult to make in a convincing way, largely because of a host of presuppositions most of us bring into play when dealing with photographs. What I wish to suggest is that many rather ordinary photographs and some extraordinary ones as well, while informative in a perfectly straightforward way, are nonetheless not documentary in character. And I want to insist, though I shall not insist for very long, that these pictures are no more and no less documentary than their exact counterparts in other graphic media.

Consider a photographic still life, say, "Heavy Roses," by Edward Steichen (Figure 1). Is this photograph a document? It is clear to me that it is not, given the arguments discussed above. To get the proper depth of the question, we need to consider another picture—a painting—of the same objects in the same array. Is the painting a document or is it a still life? My strong inclination here is to argue that the painting is not a document for the same reasons that the photograph is not. It is not that the photograph or the painting failed to achieve something that each might have, but that the type of picture it is nearly precludes the possibility of documentary. What reasons might be advanced in support of classifying the photograph as a document? I can think of only one: the roses depicted in the photograph once truly existed in the specific concatenation depicted. This is an enormously loaded way of putting the matter, but I will not object to it. What we need to know, however, is why it is that the reality of the objects depicted is supposed to account for the documentary character of the photograph. Is the still-life painting a documentary painting? My guess is that most people would resist calling it documentary in any sense even if they

Figure 1 Edward Steichen. *Heavy Roses,* Voulangis, France, 1914. Palladium print. (Plate 62 from *A Life in Photography: Edward Steichen.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963.)

Figure 2 Timothy H. O'Sullivan. *Shoshone Falls, Idaho Territory*, 1869.

were assured that the roses had really existed in front of the painter and in the exact array shown on the canvas. After all, many painters have produced still-life paintings and have made them with all the usual objects of still life directly in front of them. And historians of painting have resisted classifying these paintings as documentary. They have resisted not because they were uncertain whether the painter kept the depicted objects in view during the activity of painting and not because they had reason to believe the painter was less than accurate, but because the documentary category somehow failed to apply. The photograph by Steichen should fail for similar reasons. The point I wish to emphasize is that both pictures do indeed provide information, but the information is somehow not of the "right" type. It will be necessary to return later to the notion of the right kind of information.[7]

2. Documentary Intention

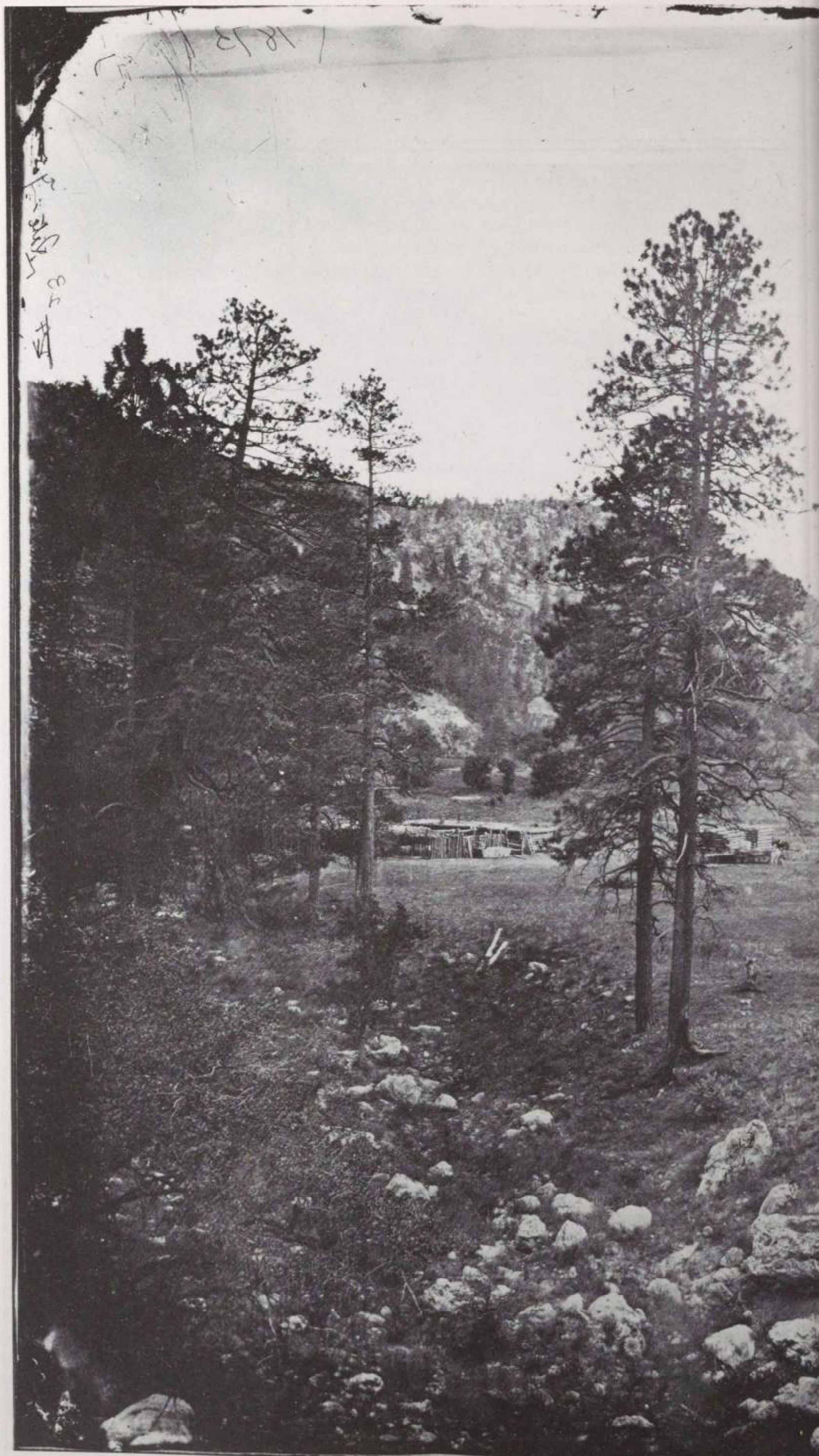
The subject of intentions is a notorious philosophic thicket into which some philosophers have entered and from which few have returned. The issue of documentary intention is doubly perplexing because it joins two terms that individually stand in need of analysis and clarification. The purpose of these remarks is to set out a number of objections to the notion of documentary intention and not to provide a positive account of intentionality or of documentary intention. I hope to show that questions of intention are not central to the analysis of most documentary pictures and that in the context of such analysis, no reference need be made to a specifically documentary intention.

It sometimes seems that there is a crude Kantianism that stands in back of claims about the centrality of intention in the definition of documentary. It is useful to recall that claims about the definability of documentary through recourse to the intention of the photographer ordinarily come up in a reasonably charged context. The issue under examination is usually the legitimacy of dealing with certain kinds of photographs *as if* they were works of art and *as if* they were amenable to certain kinds of art-historical classification and analysis. Critics who object to this practice initiate their objections with a question about the intention with which the photograph or photographs were made. This question is meant to demonstrate that such pictures do not qualify as "esthetic" items, because unlike "genuine" works of art whose genetic pedigree includes the motivation to make a work of art, these pictures have no such art motive in their causal history.

It seems reasonable to ask if indisputable works of art achieve their art status by virtue of having been engendered by the appropriate intention. Is the difference between a picture art historians pronounce to be a work of art and one they feel fails to achieve such status a difference locatable in an intention? If Leonardo da Vinci decides to produce a painting for "purely" utilitarian reasons, is the painting therefore not a work of art, all issues of style and execution being equal? The opposite case is equally upsetting to an intentionalist account of art. If a painter who is demonstrably without talent intends to make a work of art, it is hard to see on the intentional account how he or she could fail. In response, an intentionalist might argue that in order to produce a work of art, an artist must have the right intention *and* produce a good picture. But now the role assigned to the intention is gratuitous. Why not eliminate it altogether and simply demand that the painter produce a good painting? It does seem clear that howsoever we may want to constitute a definition of art, the presence of a specific kind of intention will never amount to a necessary or even sufficient condition for the classification of a painting as a work of art.

The formal case against documentary intention is very much the same as the case against the artistic variety. Having the appropriate documentary intention does not always guarantee the production of a photograph that will be documentary in character, nor does a total lack of such intention always result in a failure to produce a documentary picture. To deny this amounts to denying that we ever fail in our purposes or that we never produce unexpected or unwanted results while engaged in some purposeful activity.

Still, the objections just noted are admittedly formal in nature and do not get to what I take to be a central difficulty with classifying documentary in terms of specific intentions. The problem I have in mind concerns, very broadly speaking, what it means to execute a pictorial purpose of any kind. One obvious problem with the intentionalist view is that it atomizes the notions of intention, purpose, motive. It deals with these notions and human action in general in much the same way that the Supreme Court of the United States dealt with the issue of political representation. "One man, one vote," freed of its sexist implications, is an admirable political policy. However, "one action, one intention" as a general rule of human affairs is unnecessarily niggardly and is simply false in most cases of human action, unless we understand human intentions to be highly complex "molecules." Though often neatly formulatable, human purposes are rarely discrete, uncomplicated matters. When the formation of an intention necessarily involves the ability to perform certain activities with skill, the intention itself will turn out, on analysis, to be extraordinarily complex.



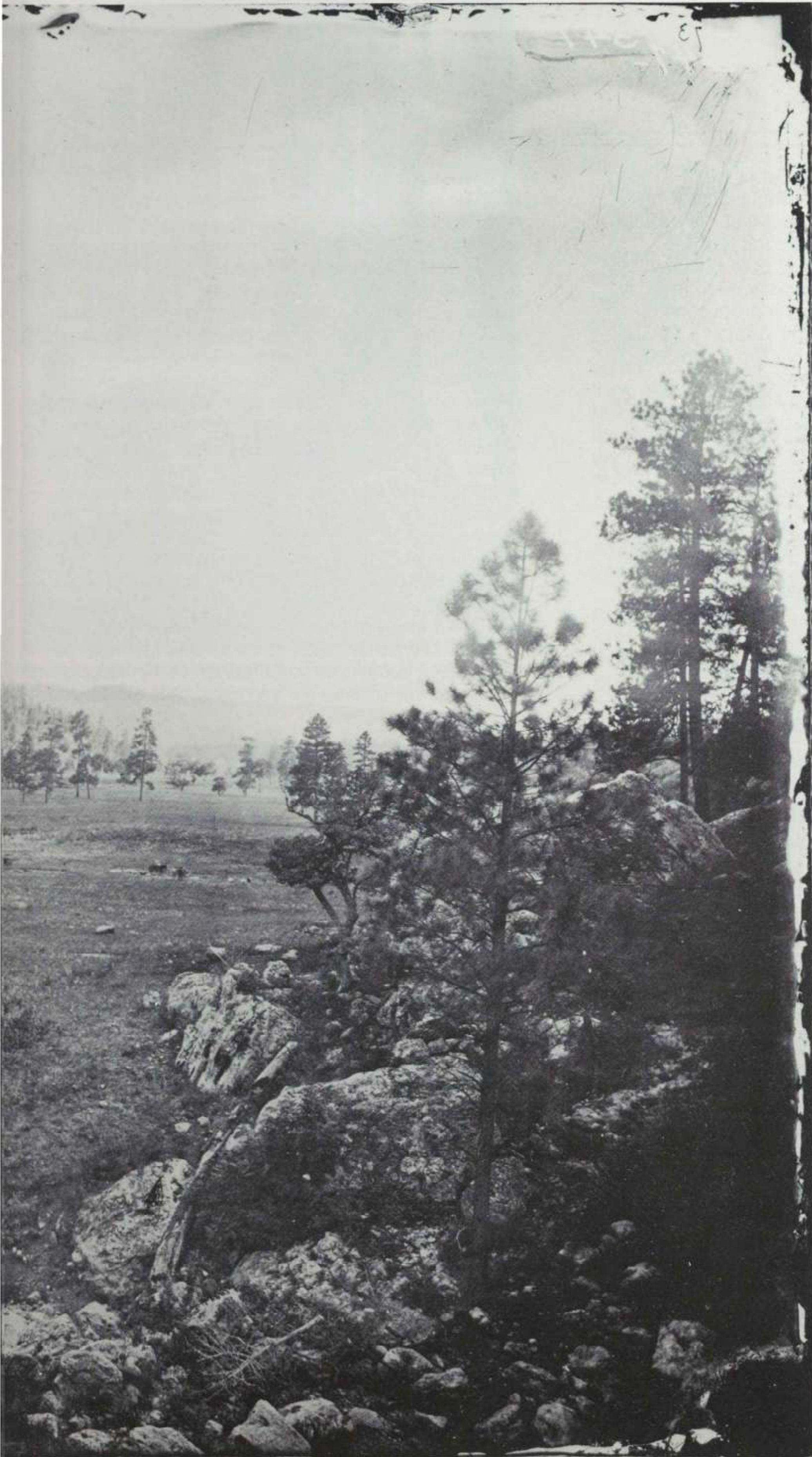


Figure 3 Timothy H. O'Sullivan. *Cooley's Park, Sierra Blanca Range, Arizona*, 1873.

In light of these considerations, what might it mean for a photographer to possess a documentary intention? What might it mean to suggest that the exploration photographer O'Sullivan photographed the unexplored American West with a "pure documentary intention?" Certainly, at some not very deep level, it meant that he took his job to be the production of photographs that would depict the West in a perspicuous fashion. Since O'Sullivan worked for expeditions that were understood to be scientific in character, we could be more demanding and require of his intention that it include the desire to produce "records of fact"—"objective" documents.

But now the inevitable questions arise: How do we define the terms? Where do the definitions for "perspicuous," "records of fact," and "objective" come from? If a documentary photograph is the result of a documentary intention, what is the connection between the intention and the way the photograph *looks* (Figures 2 and 3)? Just how is a "pure" documentary photograph supposed to look? And what makes a photograph an "impure" document—a picture that fails as a pure, objective record? Are there conventions of documentary depiction (or were there such conventions in the late 1860s and early 1870s)? If there are such conventions, are they not part and parcel of what it means to be a skilled photographer of the kind O'Sullivan was? And this already complicated set of considerations gets even more complex the moment we grant (what I believe we are often forced to grant in cases of documentary and what we are most definitely required to demand in the case of O'Sullivan) that part of what went into making these photographs was great concern with issues of pictorial interest, coherence, clarity, and even landscape issues—consideration of the beauty, sublimity, or picturesque character of the finished photograph. In other words, even if there were such a thing as "the" documentary intention standing in back of a documentary photograph, it would have to include, of necessity, a pictorial intention as well. And this pictorial intention cannot be derived from the documentary. If it were possible to analyze intentions into subintentions and skills, it would turn out that the intention to make a "record" of, say, a rock formation would not be enough of an intention to generate a "record." We would have to add the intention to make a picture, a "pictorial record." My difficulty with those writers and historians who are opposed to the construction of an art history of photography on the grounds that the utilitarian photographs included in these histories were made solely with "pure documentary intention" centers on their failure to attend to what is implied in having a pictorial purpose at all.

This issue can be made more clear by trying to imagine what a "pure documentary photograph" might look like. I admit to being unable to imagine anything at all that might correspond to this apparently undefinable notion. Obviously, what is intended by "pure documentary photograph" is a picture that escapes or negates every convention of pictorial depiction. The historical record does not provide such examples, however. Most documentary pictures are highly conventional, and a careful analysis of the depictive conventions used in them will reveal that these habits of representation come from a diverse field of interests, from a variety of established pictorial enterprises. Since human activities are not hermetically sealed off one from the next, we should not be surprised to find "pure documentary photographs" that show some use of conventions drawn from high art. The notion of defining documentary in terms of intention, like the program of defining it in terms of the built-in necessities of photography, fails to account for the varied kinds of photographs we classify as documentary. Ultimately, each of these attempts fails because each substitutes mystification (either through "essences" or by way of "intentions") for explication.

Documentary without Ontology

Defining Subject Matter

I remarked at the beginning that debates over the ontological status of photographs are futile. But they are worse than merely a waste of time. As long as the study of photographs remains committed to explanations of subject matter and style that proceed from "the way things were" at the time of the photographer's exposure, we can expect to receive very little of use or interest in the analyses of pictures. Consider three photographs; a street scene from London of the 1870s by John Thomson; a view of urban poverty in Manhattan from the mid-1880s by Jacob Riis; and a photograph made by Walker Evans in 1936 of sharecroppers in Alabama (Figures 4, 5, and 6). Each of these photographs is generally thought of as documentary, each somehow involved with the facts of the situation, and each "about" the poor.

If these photographs are to be understood as something like facsimiles of the worlds they depict, they will remain static, inert, and recalcitrant.[8] They will refuse to yield to analysis because the ontological approach to documentary eliminates the possibility of pictorial analysis. It would be wrong—conceptually wrong—to think of the photographs by Thomson, Riis, and Evans as having the same subject matter: the ur-

Figure 4 John Thomson. No title. (From John Thomson and Adolphe Smith, *Street Life in London,* London, 1877.)

Figure 5 Jacob Riis. *Necktie Workshop in a Division Street Tenement,* 1890. (Plate from Peter Pollack, *The Picture History of Photography: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day,* rev. ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969, p. 302.)

ban and rural poor. The photographs are different from one another because their subject matter is substantially different.

The subjects of Thomson's photographs of "street scenes" in London are stereotypical, without personality. Each figure in the photographs stands for a type, and it is clear from *Street Life in London* (Thomson and Smith 1877), the book in which the photographs appear, that both the photographer and author conceive of themselves as producing something like a typological account of London's quaint, albeit suffering, poor. The photographs are typical themselves; the arrangements of the various types, the discrete physical distance of nearly all the people from the camera, are in keeping with the standard conventions of depiction that can be found in numerous nineteenth-century books carrying titles like *Picturesque Types of Old Chicago* or *Picturesque Types of Glasgow and Edinburgh.*

If Thomson was interested in doing a typology of the quaint urban poor, Riis was interested in another kind of typology: a monistic typology in which the variety of national and racial types is reduced to one common type by the degradation of the slums—the beast of the urban jungle. It is clear from Riis's book about the slums of lower Manhattan in the mid-1880s, *How the Other Half Lives* (Riis 1890), that he believed the greed of landowners was responsible for the growth of a virulent "moral contagion," a disease that afflicted all the inhabitants of the slums with the exception of some of the children. It is further clear that Riis believed it would be necessary to write off an entire generation or two of these unassimilated, un-American types while attempting to correct the situation by raising the children in clean, modern tenements and providing them with the necessary education to become "proper" Americans. The book moves from chapter to chapter, dealing with various national and racial types in a most vulgar and "discriminating" manner. And yet, for all the vulgarity and unhumorous jokes about Italians, Jews, Irish, Chinese, Blacks, Germans, Bohemians, and so on, both the text and the photographs demonstrate that the conditions of the slums cancel out the various and (for Riis) real differences between types of people. What remains is the jungle animal quality of the people—a quality that allows them to kill their young (as part of an insurance racket), to drink themselves to death in "back alley gin mills," to lose all ability to feel compassion. And Riis's photographs portray these people as if in cages—cramped, barely alive, living in their own excrement, stunned with eyes agape. An understanding of Riis's photographs would have to include comment on his remarkably crude technique and the way in which this very crudeness becomes part of his pictorial rhetoric. The photographs are by and large antipicturesque—the compositions so often "dis-com-

posed," the grain large and pronounced, the contrasts unacceptably vast—and they advertise themselves as being "without artifice": as "spontaneous," as unconcerned with anything so trivial as clarity, prettiness, pictorial acceptability. If Riis had planned it, which he obviously did not, he could not have contrived a more useful way of characterizing his subject in pictorial terms. Photographs that emphasized the quaintness of the urban poor, their cute manners, and rascallike qualities were certainly available to Riis. They would not have been suited to his purposes.

Walker Evans's photograph of the doorway to the home of a sharecropping family in Alabama (Figure 6) is obviously concerned both with issues of formal clarity and with conveying information about the family's unself-conscious sense of arrangement and order. The photograph appears in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans 1941) and is part of the first, brief "volume" of the book dedicated solely to Evans's photographs that appear without any captions or commentary whatsoever. The second part of the book is a long, extraordinarily self-conscious text by James Agee that describes the singularity, the "unrepeatability" and "divinity" of the sharecroppers and their families. Evans's photographs parallel Agee's text. The text shifts back and forth between first-person descriptions and narratives, filled with personal information about Agee and his reactions to the members of the families, and "objective" descriptions of the sharecroppers, their homes, and possessions. Evans's photographs shift between highly formal, composed portraits for which the people have arranged themselves, as well as pictures of details of the homes and the farm (pictures that often look like still-life arrangements), and snapshots, primarily of the families, in which they are seen unaware, distracted, unself-conscious, and unarranged.

Evans's photograph is defined by a set of interests that are clearly documentary. It conveys both Evans's and Agee's romantic sense of the intuitive "esthetic" or sense of order that the sharecroppers expressed in the arrangement of their lives and their few possessions. Whether one is fascinated or horrified by the intrusion of Evans and Agee into the lives of these people, it seems difficult to deny that this photograph is a pictorial report of an observation few other photographers would have made at the time.[9] My point here is not to praise or blame Evans or Thomson or Riis but to find an adequate description for the way each worked. Unlike Thomson and Riis, Evans was not interested in a variegated or monistic typology. Quite to the contrary, his concern was in the unrepeatable and singular. His method of depicting this uniqueness involved a continual contrast between pictures like Figure 6 and snapshotlike photographs (Figure 7). The formal clarity of the photograph of the doorway is complicated by the remarkable precision of line and the richness of the tonal structure (Evans used an 8 by 10 view camera for Figure 6).

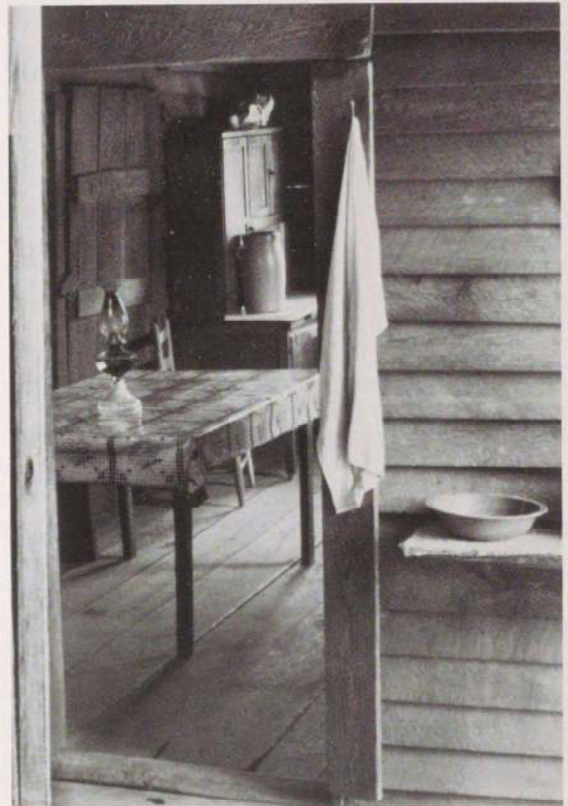


Figure 6 Walker Evans. *Burroughs Kitchen,* Hale County, Alabama, 1936. 8 × 10 in. (Plate 77 from *Walker Evans: First and Last.* New York: Harper & Row, 1978.)

An explanation of why these photographs by Thomson, Riis, and Evans look the way they do is, of necessity, going to depend upon a study of conventional means of depiction, and these conventions will play a central role in determining what the photographer has accomplished at the level of defining the subject matter of the photograph. Such definition is the central task of any picture maker, and it would be futile to look in front of the photographer's camera for the subject matter that will appear in the finished photograph. Depending on what the photograph looks like, it may or may not be possible to identify some or all of the objects depicted in the photograph.[10] There is a profound difference between subjects and objects, between subject matter and object matter. Perhaps it is a function of the great accessibility of photographs, of the relative ease of making them, and of our great familiarity with viewing them, that we overlook with such apparent ease the simple fact that subjects do not reduce to objects, that there is no equation across an equal sign between them. If there were such an equation, all photographs of the same place made at the same time would look alike. They

Figure 7 Walker Evans. *Floyd Burroughs and Tengle Children,* Hale County, Alabama, 1936. 35 mm. (Plate 81 from *Walker Evans: First and Last.* New York: Harper & Row, 1978.)

would look just like the objects represented. That photographs made by a number of photographers working under the same conditions in the same place at the same time need not (and often do not) look alike is perhaps not terribly surprising. But while this observation does not surprise, it remains for someone to explain, in straightforward and nonmetaphysical terms, how this is possible.

Perhaps we could get a better grasp on what is difficult about this kind of question by asking a similarly difficult one: How might we explain the production of the same or very nearly the same picture by, say, ten photographers working in the same place at the same time? It will explain nothing to give an account solely in material terms, that is, to say that the photographers, using similar cameras, lenses, film, and exposures, stood roughly in the same place and aimed in roughly the same direction. This merely restates the question in new terms: It states what had to happen technically for all the pictures to turn out (roughly) the same. What we need is an explanation of why they all did the same thing. Without belaboring the point, it seems clear to me that an explanation will have to invoke some notion of common purpose: The photographs look alike because, say, the assignment was to produce a certain kind of picture. Invoking a purpose may look like but is, in fact, not at all equivalent to the invocation of an intention to explain the "nature" of a picture. A purpose is a goal to be accomplished. It is not a psychological state. In picture making, certain tasks have become so thoroughly a part of our everyday pictorial currency that the formulae for achieving the purpose are public property. These formulae or conventions of depiction become like second nature for us. They are essential parts of the picture making and picture "reading" process. Some of them have become such thoroughly standard fixtures of our conceptual environment, of the way we describe or depict or think of parts of the world, that it is quite difficult at times to believe they are cultural products and not natural features that attend our experience of the world.

The differences, then, among the photographs of Thomson, Riis, and Evans cannot be reduced to a difference of nominal object matter. They are different because they rely upon different conventions of depiction, upon different formulae for the constitution of subject matter.

My observations about these photographs are meant only to reinforce the suggestion that documentary photographers must, of necessity, fall back onto or devise methods of portrayal that provide the

means for defining subject matter. It is useful to think of the problem of subject matter in terms of a counterfactual question: If Riis had photographed in Alabama in 1936 and Evans had photographed in Manhattan in the 1880s, each working with his characteristic purpose in mind, would Riis's photographs have turned out like those of Evans and Evans's like those of Riis? A negative answer to this question makes my point, while an affirmative answer pushes the question of subject matter back onto the object matter of the world. For my own part, it seems to me that the counterfactual must be answered in the negative. To deny that different photographers characteristically work in different ways—produce photographs with very different pictorial qualities—may make a point, but it does so at the expense of the facts.

Defining "Documentary"

Is it possible after all these considerations to provide a definition of documentary? If the request is for an exhaustive formula, one that provides common and peculiar properties for all photographs called documentary, I believe the answer is no. If the request is for some rough guidelines, then some answers are certainly possible.

Documentary is a classificatory category that is established by use and not by essential character. Thus, calling photographs documentary is not contingent upon the assignment of some special quality of accuracy to them; it is providing them with certain uses. Accuracy, understood in terms of a profusion of finely resolved detail, is not a defining character of documentary, though it may be a quality of some, perhaps many, documentary pictures. A photograph, say, one of downtown Denver in the 1890s, may have been produced with a "purely esthetic" intention—a desire to make a pretty, decorative, or beautiful cityscape. It may have hung for years on some wall before anyone thought it useful for establishing something about Denver in the nineties. At that moment, a documentary use was projected for the photograph, and if in time someone actually used the photograph to establish some point, no matter how trivial, about "Old Denver," the picture became a document as well as an object of art (or a failed object of art or perhaps just a pretty picture). This new use for the picture ought not to be thought of as a kind of transubstantiation or metamorphosis. It is more adequately described in much simpler terms—the picture took on an informative use. Why many of us think of this process as peculiarly photographic is an interesting question, and I suspect that a full answer to it would reveal much about how we have come to think about certain features of the world. But it should be emphasized that this kind of dual value is far from being peculiar to photographs. Egyptian statuary, Minoan warehouse receipts, all sorts of items never intended to be documents—bits of evidence about the way a culture operated—have over time taken on the same kind of dual use. So far, I have only suggested that some photographs become documentary over time, and this assertion seems quite beyond dispute to me. This claim shows that it is true, at least in some cases, that a photograph need not possess a special photographic quality or have been engendered by some special intention to qualify as documentary. This is an important claim in itself. If we paid sufficient attention to the uses to which many paintings and drawings are quite commonly put, we might not find this fact odd. Cultural and art historians routinely make use of paintings as perfectly reliable evidentiary sources of one kind or another, even though the paintings might be thought of most properly as "works of art," and even though the painters had no intention of informing their audience about their everyday surroundings. Thus, paintings by Vermeer can provide architectural historians as well as historians of modes of dress with basic materials for their studies.

One of the great pleasures of studying photography is the exposure one constantly receives to the great abyss that separates our preconceptions about what all photographs must be from our knowledge of how extraordinarily diverse they are. According to many writers on the subject, the single most important virtue of photography is its capacity to resolve a profusion of extremely fine detail, far in excess, we are told, of the accurate detail that a sketcher or painter can provide. Indeed, one of the primary reasons advanced by critics for according photography its preeminent role as a documentary medium is precisely this capacity "to render momentary facts in sharp delineation." And again, it is this feature that allows us to think of certain kinds of photographs as "natural records" of what they depict.

But now consider these observations in light of the Kennedy assassination photographs (I have the Zapruder film in mind). This film footage is clearly documentary, clearly in some sense a record of the assassination. Perhaps more than any others, these pictures demonstrate the futility of formulating the notion of documentary solely in terms of peculiarly photographic values. I do not mean to deny any relation at all between documentary and information, but I do want to call into question the uncomplicated and easy identification of what is assumed to be "peculiarly photographic" information—a kind of information that only photography can give—with the reason for calling a photograph documentary. Allowing this equation to go unchallenged, concluding that some or all photographs are documents because they contain special, privileged information about the "facts" of the

Figure 8 Abraham Zapruder. *Kennedy Assassination,* November 22, 1963. (Frame from 8 mm. color film).

"objective world," amounts to misunderstanding the variety of uses to which documentary photographs are put.

When the Kennedy assassination pictures are viewed frame by frame (Figure 8), they fail to provide the kind of information that is unambiguously evidentiary in nature, that is, the kind of information lawyers, police laboratories, perhaps even historians require to support allegations or hypotheses. Each of these photographs is blurred, unacceptably fuzzy, totally devoid of sharply rendered details. It has been amply demonstrated over the past twenty years that the photographs are useless as indices of the direction or number of bullets shot at Kennedy. In fact, the photographs provide so little useful information of this kind that they can be used to validate contrary opinions about the direction of the bullets. It would be hard to say, even approximately, just what new or useful (or specifically photographic) information is provided by the photographs. It is likewise difficult to determine just what information about the assassination is available only from these pictures that would not be available from other nonphotographic sources. Still, these pictures clearly qualify as documents of the assassination. And they are despite our inability to give an account of the unique information that all documentary photographs are supposed to provide. The very odd point at work here is that it is both too difficult and too easy to explain just what our interest is in these pictures. We cannot say that the film shows us what we would have seen if we had been watching Kennedy at the moment he was shot, because we would not have seen the event as it is portrayed in the film. Nor can we say that this film "reveals" details of the assassination that are otherwise unavilable to us. What we can say is that the film fails to show us what we might have seen and fails to provide us with details that we could not have seen but makes us *feel* as if we are somehow in the presence of Kennedy at the moment of his assassination. This is not an inconsiderable accomplishment; it accounts for much of the power of some memorable documentary photographs. But while we may *feel* we are in Kennedy's presence, we *know* (perhaps I should say we *should* know) that we are not. We feel in the presence of Kennedy at the moment he was shot; we know we are not; we know we would not have seen it the way it is portrayed in the pictures; we learn nothing from the photographs of an independent and peculiarly photographic character. It is therefore odd that we want to say of these pictures that they are "credible." What might possibly be the object of our credence? The most useful way of approaching this remarkably complicated problem would be through an examination of the various tropes and commonplaces of documentary photography, that is, an examination of the rhetorical figures of documentary (and not through the

Figure 9 Robert Capa. *D-Day Normandy Beachhead,* 1944. (Plate from Peter Pollack, *The Picture History of Photography: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day,* rev. ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969, p. 605.)

construction of *the* rhetoric of photography or *the* documentary photograph).

Robert Capa's D-Day photograph of an American soldier on the Normandy beachhead magnifies the problems just discussed (Figure 9). In this picture, the relation between what is thought to be uniquely photographic information and documentation seems very nearly broken. Unlike the assassination photographs, this picture was produced by a photographer who was well aware of the rhetorical character of his work—aware of the need to engage an audience. Capa used a compact 35mm camera, grainy film, and a slow shutter speed. The photograph is a swirl of blur and grain. Again, like the assassination photographs, this picture gives very little in the way of detailed information. Would there have been a great expansion of the documentary value of this photograph if Capa had used a faster shutter speed? It is unlikely that sharper definition could have made this photograph into a better document of the invasion. In fact, it seems quite clear to me that the effect, the way the photograph causes us to respond, is totally dependent upon our knowledge that the picture was made at Normandy together with the obscurity (the sublimity—dare I take a term from the rhetorician Burke?) brought about by the overall blur.

Eliminating or reducing our commitment to the privileged relation of photograph to world allows us to identify the remarkable variety of our pictorial habits, to see how effortlessly we move from picture to picture, invoking different and often contradictory beliefs in order to make sense of various kinds of documentary photographs. It has the further and analytically more important value of permitting us to see that our notions of document, record, objective picture, and the like are not fixed and determinate, but on the contrary are flexible, open, and changeable. We value some documentary photographs because they are clear and filled with information we need, while we value others as documentary because of (or despite) the absence of the kind of information we often think of as specifically photographic. The advantage of adopting a deontologized notion of documentary is further underscored by the complexity and richness it restores to the world. Instead of thinking of these photographs as passive reflectors of preformed facts, it forces us to see how the process of finding or depicting facts is itself formulaic, guided by habits of observation and skills of representation, and dependent ultimately upon our culture and our interests. Documentary without ontology allows us to make sense of the difference between pictures that take on a documentary value over time and photographs that are self-consciously documentary. The work of "serious" documentary photographers is intended to engage our attention, to inform us, and to move us to act. More often than not, it deals with an "exotic" topic—with events, actions, or persons we as members of the audience could not see on our own. And, as I have noted, we fail to come to terms with these photographs if we think of them as depicting a preexisting subject matter. Documentary photographers of the self-conscious variety, whether we think of them as doing important or merely self-serving work, are engaged in the work of defining subject matter.

It should be clear, finally, that I can see no way of divorcing photographic documentation from the general issues of depiction. A documentary photographer is above all a picture maker, and the problems he or she faces are pictorial in nature. We may condemn the photographer for the production of beautiful photographs of what we take to be an ugly aspect of the world (as numerous critics have condemned beautiful photographs of war or urban poverty), but such disapproval, to be moral, rests upon the recognition that the photographer could have chosen other available means to make different photographs. In a very important sense, the photographer does not "record the facts"; he or she makes documents and the audience accepts or rejects them, that is, confirms or denies that the evidence, the documents, support the case, constitute the facts. A photographer engaged in making documentary pictures will utilize the pictorial formulae that are available at the time or will reject them and develop new ones. In the latter case, the photographer runs the risk of confusing the audience, unless the new formulae are accessible to it. There are no pictorial formulae that are specifically documentary, though there are some that are often used by photographic documentarians. If what I have said is true, then there is nothing to prevent someone like myself from being interested in the pictorial qualities of photographs (documentary or not), in their formulae, their formal components, irrespective of the judgments of value (or, more likely, judgments of the absence of value) traditional art historians or modern revisionist critics of photography may make about them. If there has been a "secret agenda" at work in this article, it has been to make this obvious point.

Notes

1 This is perhaps the most commonly held view about photography, although it takes many forms. Some representative works that employ this notion are Bazin 1967:8ff.; Arnheim 1974; Ivins 1973; Gombrich 1969:67–73; Sontag 1977; Naef 1974; and Krauss 1981.

2 Perhaps the most voluble exponent of this view at the present moment is Abigail Solomon-Godeau. See Solomon-Godeau 1981, 1983.

3 I do not believe that this statement is a burlesque as much as it might be too compact. A critic who questions the legitimacy of submitting a photograph made for utilitarian purposes to some form of art historical or "esthetic" analysis might be suggesting that the "genetics" or conditions of a work of art must necessarily include the self-conscious intention by an artist to make a work of art. In turn, this self-consciousness might itself be required to include a consciousness of the tradition of the art in which the artist is engaged, the set of artistic problems presently engaged by artists using a particular medium, and so on. Depending upon their views on art, there are a variety of ways in which these critics might lay out the intentional conditions of art. In any of these cases it will turn out that utilitarian works fail to meet the conditions of art and *ex hypothesi* are not legitimately subject to the sorts of analysis reserved for works of art.

4 At least some of these critics cite Walter Benjamin's work on photography with approval—indicating the possibility that any art-history of photography would be viewed as "regressive" to the extent that it seeks to address issues of "genius," "mystery," or even of "form and content." While one may object to the tone in which such assertions about utilitarian photographs are often made (supposing, for the moment, that the label fits the pictures) and may further be weary of the inevitable answers such questions are supposed to provoke (that, e.g., photographs of this kind should be analyzed solely in terms of the power relations they express or maintain), dismissing such questions out of hand fails to address an important set of issues raised by these critics. For my part, I see no reason to object to such political analyses. I do strongly take issue, however, with the claim that photographs may only be analyzed in such terms. The latter position is unwarranted.

5 These remarks are obviously conclusory and are intended as shorthand summations of long arguments. For expansion, see my essay "Picturing Vision" (Snyder 1980) and "Photography, Vision, and Representation" (Snyder and Allen 1975). Perhaps the most total demolition of naive theories of representation and of the claim that photographs differ in essential ways from handmade pictures can be found in the enormously influential *Languages of Art*, by Nelson Goodman (1968).

6 There is no such thing as accuracy, unqualified and pure and simple. An accurate photograph need not look like the object depicted. X-ray photographs of fractured bones are usually quite accurate but do not look like fractured bones. Similarly, color infrared photographs taken from satellites show diseased crops as green and healthy crops as red. Accuracy in some particular respect is not an inherent feature of photography—it is an achievement. Those who want to believe in the special accuracy of photographs usually reason that the photographic process proceeds in accordance with various "laws of nature" and that these laws provide certain guarantees of accuracy. This is not a useful way of thinking about the process, but even if it were, it would fail to demonstrate anything about its supposed inherent accuracy. Conceiving of a uniformly grey photographic print, produced by inadvertently turning on the darkroom lights while opening a fresh package of photographic paper, as an accurate record requires a mind that has no serious or useful notion of accuracy at all. The attempt to reason from the "accuracy" of the uniformly grey photograph to the purported accuracy of an ordinary documentary photograph will not work. The grey patch is neither accurate nor inaccurate; the documentary photograph may or may not be accurate.

7 It might be useful to think of corresponding cases in journalism. A firsthand report of a battle, written for a newspaper, is certainly classifiable as a documentary report. However, a description of, say, an automobile that appears in an advertisement, even if perfectly accurate and written in the presence of the car in question, would not generally qualify as a documentary report. The intriguing question is why this is an easy distinction to make in the case of written description and a very difficult one to make with photographs.

8 It is a measure of the extent to which our thought is dominated by pictures that we think it possible to make sense of the notion of a visual facsimile of the world. The reader might try to give "visual facsimile" some sense by imagining what such a facsimile of everything he or she is presently seeing might possibly look like. Will everything be in focus or just some things? Will it be in color? Chances are the reader will conclude that a "visual facsimile" is a picture and a highly conventional one at that.

9 I have not denied the possibility of producing documentary photographs that might correctly be termed "records" or "reports" or, for that matter, can properly be thought of as "objective." Again, the proper attribution of these terms depends upon numerous factors, of which function and purpose are two of the most important. Still, the question of the proper attribution of these terms will depend upon the existing conventions of "objective" depiction and not on the "inherently objective" qualities of photography. There are reasonably well-established formulae for the production of record photographs, and these formulae generally work against the production of pictorial characters that signal the presence of the photographer. Thus, such formulae ordinarily avoid, e.g., upward- or downward-looking points of vantage, the sorts of perspectives that are not standard in some specifiable way. We are quite content to accept these pictures as objective records, because the formulae employed in them are "second nature" to us and because pictures using these forms are often said to be "styleless," that is, made by no identifiable picture maker. One must be very careful about generalizing from this observation. Walker Evans made great use of this "neutral" mode of depiction to make pictures that are highly stylized. Similarly, Eugene Atget produced photographs that depend upon formulae that are very nearly the same as those used by quite conventional photographers of his time, though his photographs are quite different from theirs. The intriguing point here is that there is no reason why these conventions should be opposed to conventions that are thought of as peculiarly artistic. If an Evans or Atget print achieves some pictorial distinction—is, say, nominated for candidacy as a work of art by the Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art—one may disagree, but the disagreement will not be over the misattribution of the term "art" to works that are merely documentary, as if the term fails on principle to apply to the work in question. The disagreement will in fact be about something a bit more nebulous, perhaps about the definition of "art" itself. And that is quite a different matter.

10 This may seem overly cautious, but it only seems that way. It may prove impossible to identify all the objects that, in fact, were arrayed in front of a camera and within the angle of acceptance of its lens (its "field of view") when viewing perfectly "ordinary" photographs (documentary and other kinds as well). Out-of-focus areas, for example, may remain thoroughly resistant to identification. The various infelicities of the photographic process—grain, blurs, high contrast, etc.—may also make recognition or identification of objects quite impossible.

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