

DOCUMENTARY FICTIONS?

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In 1984, Alan Trachtenberg published an essay on Walker Evans' classic book *American Photographs*. He began by noting that, when the book first appeared in 1938, critics 'assumed at once that the pictures represented a real and demonstrable America'. However, after an analysis of how the book actually constructs our view of its subject, Trachtenberg ended by calling *American Photographs* 'a fictive world, an America of the imagination: a documentary invention'.

In 1988, the British photographer Chris Killip published a book of his photographs *In Flagrate*. It was at first sight a detailed documentation of working class life in the North-East of England, extending a tradition in British documentary which one can trace back to the thirties. Yet Killip had different ambitions for his work and, in his preface, he wrote: 'The photographs can tell you more about me than about what they describe. The book is a fiction about a metaphor'. I'm not sure what a 'fiction about a metaphor' might be, but nevertheless, the intention is clear. 'Fiction' suggests that, once again, this documentary is an invention and 'metaphor' suggests that this factuality actually means something else, something more to do with the author than with his subject.

These two disparate examples suggest something of what has happened to documentary in the eighties and nineties, both in a reading of the history of the genre and in the intentions of its contemporary practitioners. Recent documentary has come to acknowledge that objective reportage is impossible, that any story is told from a particular point of view and indeed turned in that process into a 'story', a narrative imposed on reality; it acknowledges that 'history is told by the winners'; that photographs construct as much as they record. How then can we still believe that what we see is 'true'? For surely the concept of a 'documentary invention', a 'documentary fiction' is a contradiction which

undermines the very basis of the genre. And if we don't believe in documentary, then what *use* is it?

Yet the best of the work produced in the last decade does show that it is possible to combine scepticism about documentary itself with a continuing critique of shifts in society and culture. Indeed, I would argue that the political power of this work has been all the stronger for that self-appraisal, without ever losing sight of the fact that, in a post-colonial, post-industrial, post-modern world, it is imperative that we should not be very sure of ourselves.

I can't really illustrate this complex process with one picture; indeed, as I will argue below, documentary is surely no longer about 'great' individual pictures, nor even 'great' individual photographers. But one image which does suggest something of what I've been proposing here was taken by Paul Reas at Beamish in Durham, one of the many industrial heritage museums which opened in the eighties (though Beamish is rather particular, being almost completely fabricated from buildings brought from elsewhere). The sun is shining on Beamish, on the brewery cart, the iron lamp standard, the tramtracks that end abruptly at a fence covered in old advertisements. And it's also shining on the memories stored up behind that fence, memories clipped from old copies of Picture Post and from G.P.O. newsreels.

And, of course, it is also shining on the tourists. One visitor in particular occupies the front of the image, a middle-aged man in a tweed jacket who films the scene with his Super 8 camera (maybe just a year or two later, even he will be using a camcorder). Whereas the scene behind is lit by the sun, this man is lit by the photographer's flash, making it look as if he's not in the scene at all, but rather in front of a screen on which it is being projected. The effect is physically the result of a particular photographic technology, yet it can also act as another sort of metaphor, representative of how we in our heritagized age relate to our history, a history that, like Beamish itself, is often constructed as nostalgic scenery. We can no longer be in there; we stand out here and look at it, making our own simulacrum of it. The photographic conceit and the political meaning interlock completely.

There is of course, a context and a history to this repositioning of documentary photography. It is parallel to very similar processes in other documentary media - notably film and television, but also biography and journalism - and related to the development of hybrid forms of 'docudrama' and 'faction'. There are also parallels with other cultural practices whose history has similarly shifted from colonial certainty to post-colonial doubt - for example, anthropological fieldwork. But it has also developed out of a critique of documentary photography itself which was mounted most acutely in 1981 by the American critic and artist Martha Rosler:

‘The exposé, the compassion and outrage of documentary fueled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting - and careerism.’

Rosler also coined a term which ever since has acutely pinned down the power relationship between photographer and subject: ‘victim photography’.

There have been a number of responses to this critique. One has been to reassert the more positive moral and pictorial values of traditional documentary and, in discussing a 'new' documentary here, I do not want to denigrate the achievement of photographers like Eugene Richards and Sebastiao Salgado. Another, opposing, tactic might be to admit that photographing other people is indeed exploitative, voyeuristic, and about imposing *your* vision on *their* lives, but that the important thing is to openly acknowledge the fact. The prime British exponent of such a way of working, Martin Parr, has recently described his approach in such terms. Historically, it's what makes the images of Weegee so compelling; his 'smash and grab' tactics are completely up front.

However, there have, I think, been more subtle ways in which photographers have attempted to work around these issues, and some of the range of possible directions can be gleaned by scanning a couple of recent anthologies around documentary issues, one Dutch - an issue of the magazine *Perspektief*, published in 1991 entitled ‘Repositioning Documentary’ - and one British - a British Council exhibition curated last year by Brett Rogers with the title

Documentary Dilemmas.

On the one hand, both projects included work that was nakedly and overtly subjective - Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, for instance, is fully in a confessional mode. On the other hand, both projects deliberately extended the concept of documentary to include work that might previously have belonged in another genre such as landscape. For certainly one thing that was important in the eighties was the shift in landscape photography from retrospective nostalgia to a reflection of contemporary cultural, social and even political issues. With John Davies in Britain, Thomas Struth in Germany, Richard Misrach in Nevada and Sophie Ristelhueber in Kuwait, landscape has proved itself capable of work in which the obliqueness of the commentary in fact adds to its power.

Both 'Repositioning Documentary' and *Documentary Dilemmas* also included examples of the staged image/text work that may seem to be in opposition to documentary yet which often - as in the case of Karen Knorr who is included in both anthologies - draws upon and again obliquely comments upon the power of documentary. It's also been important that other voices than that of the white male have started to be heard. Ingrid Pollard's black presence in the English landscape is important here (even if her images are in fact staged and manipulated) while 'Repositioning Documentary' included the work of the Chilean Alfredo Jaar, known for his lightbox installations, within which he uses his own 'documentary' images of third world workers. (There's a fascinating comparison to be drawn here with the traditional treatment of the same subject by Salgado.)

Where else would one look to see the most persuasive examples of this new documentary? There are, as I've indicated, individual images which exemplify some of what I am claiming here. Its effects have also infiltrated into magazines, though often in a rather exaggerated form. But, by and large, these issues and tactics require a broader field on which they can be played out. So the photographic book, always the most complex and enduring site of documentary photography, has in the past decade seen many innovations in both form and content.

I want to consider - briefly - three books, French, British and American, from

the eighties and nineties. The earliest is Gilles Peress' *Telex Iran* from 1984. Peress is a major photo-journalist who has made powerful work in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Rwanda; in 1979, he found himself in Iran as the Ayatollahs' revolution burst around him. Lost in another culture that he could not read, he did not pretend to understand it but just kept shooting pictures that expressed that position. The book is packed with images taken through car windows, through screens, images of images, images that are decentred and unstable. And threaded through the book are the telex messages between Peress and his agency Magnum: Magnum telling him to stay in there and get the pictures, Peress replying that he doesn't know what pictures he's supposed to be getting. At times, communication breaks down and Magnum can only ask 'Où est Gilles?'

In some ways, *Telex Iran* looks like traditional black and white photo-journalism: gritty black and white 35mm, the reportage of a committed individual in the midst of historical events swirling around him. Yet in other crucial ways, it is very different, for Peress does not pretend to have either the intimate understanding nor the objective overview that the Western reporter is supposed to aspire to. If knowledge is power, then Peress doesn't know and he has no power. He is just a visitor to the heart of the Other.

The second book *Steelworks*, published in 1990, is by a younger English photographer, Julian Germain. Its subject is the County Durham town of Consett, which might formerly have been the subject of a traditional study of industrial, working-class culture. But the steelworks closed down (though Kenneth Clarke doesn't seem to be aware of the fact) and as the book's subtitle says, the basis of Consett's economy has shifted 'from steel to tortilla chips'. So Germain's book is a study in the process of post-industrialisation, and the bright primary colours of his photographs betray the pain of that process.

Germain's own images, unlike those of Peress, form only a part of the overall book, and they sit alongside other sorts of photographs: snapshots collected from local people, wonderful images made by local press photographer Tommy Harris, and a reprinting of a 1974 *Sunday Times* reportage by Don McCullin, all belching smoke, tumbling slagheaps and grimy rain. Plus a range of

texts from both outsiders and insiders. Thus, though the book's cover still says 'by Julian Germain', the project contains a plurality of voices, any single position is consistently questioned and it becomes clear that wherever one stands to look at the subject, there's somewhere else over there that would be equally viable. And thus, representation isn't reality, it can't be.

The third book comes from another, quite different context: the apparently comfortable ambience of middle America. Larry Sultan's *Pictures from Home* (1992) is, on one level, an intensely personal account of his own relationship with his parents, particularly his father, a retired executive, and again it contains more than one voice. Sultan's own photographs and first person testimony is matched by those of his parents and - most potent of all - stills from their home movies, which depict, as such images always do, a world of joy and bliss at right angles to experience. At the end of the book, Sultan ironically comments, 'My father keeps asking me why I get all the credit for the pictures that he and my mother have made. It's a good question'.

There's more to the book, of course, than just a summation of the Sultan family album. Several of these images have been included in a number of recent photography exhibitions, such as *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* in New York and *Who's Looking at the Family* in London, which have concentrated on the home, the family, themes explored by many contemporary photographers and artists. They suggest that the state of the nuclear family can be seen to be a microcosm of what is happening in society at large, and that photography now might best address itself to the particular rather than the general. Thus, though it's never explicit (and it's important that it isn't so), the space between Larry Sultan and his parents might stand for that between pre- and post-Vietnam America.

Three books then, and not the only ones I could have chosen here. Three books, however, that might suggest the range of possibilities opened up by recent documentary. Three quite different subjects - Islamic fundamentalism, post-industrialization in Britain, an American family - yet with certain things in common. Searching rather than finding, none of the photographers claim a

privileged position and other voices are constantly present, while the book form allows for an intense level of intertextuality within which the photographs evoke, invoke more than they state or define.

But isn't it still the persistent factuality, the adhesion of the photograph to its source, that makes all this important? Isn't documentary still potent and moving because, albeit within this context of subjectivity and constructedness, it *documents*? And - so they say - isn't this now under renewed threat? Working on this text, I was arrested by yet another essay with a related title: 'Pedro Meyer's Documentary Fictions', in which Jonathan Green discusses new work by this Mexican photographer, formerly a photo-journalist, now making digitalized images where the level of adjustment ranges from the self-evident through the minimal to the illusory.

Maybe that new technology will, as it develops, change the nature of documentary. Maybe, as the most apocalyptic versions suggest, it will destroy it. Maybe the CD-Rom (as witness Meyer's own *I Photograph to Remember*) will come to replace the book as the prime form for the complex layerings I've outlined here. More likely, I think (though I don't know, anymore than anyone else does), these media will stand alongside each other. And documentary will survive, albeit affected by newer possibilities, precisely *because* of the shifts it has undergone in the last decade. Ten years ago, I thought documentary moribund, about to collapse under the weight of formal exhaustion and ethical paradox. Now - I don't think so.

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