

## When Seeing is Believing

The question may be asked, “When is a photograph a document?” This paper will look at this question, through an exploration of the concept of documentary photography. I will attempt to discern when what we see in an image can be regarded as believable. I will look briefly at the history of the photograph as document, and then discuss some criteria for determining the authenticity of a presumed documentary photograph. To illustrate my debate, I will examine the work of Atget, Riis, Lange, Selgado, and other photographers

But why should this question arise in the first place? From the earliest days of photography, the myth that, “The camera never lies” became a perceived truism. The image in a picture became the remembered reality for ordinary people, regardless of the functional alterations that the use of the medium demanded. Szarkowski<sup>1</sup> quotes William M Ivins Jr.:

The nineteenth century began by believing that what was reasonable was true, and it would end up by believing that what it saw in a photograph was true.

Very quickly, photographs became regarded as some sort of documentary evidence, showing the existence of places, the condition of people and things and the outcome of events. This is especially so in America, because American photographers do not seem to have been so concerned about relating their practice of the medium to earlier artistic conventions and mores, as seems to have been the case with the early European photographers. A fine art photographer, Domenico Fuschi, sums this up succinctly:

It is my opinion also that the rich artistic past of all Europe has made life very difficult for the advance of photography in the art world . . . Europe has produced astounding photographers , whose most subjects were dealing with social issues... In the U. S. the New Photographers didn't really have to fight against snobbish and blindfolded art critics , if they did, to a much lesser extent.<sup>2</sup>

Today, documentary photography has become an established part of the work of practising photographers. It need not exclude artistic expression, and the reality it depicts can often be the

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<sup>1</sup> Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, 2007, Introduction

<sup>2</sup> Fuschi, D, <http://photo.net/large-format-photography-forum/005IQH>, Accessed 26/1/09

reality as seen by the photographer,<sup>3</sup> and portrayed in an image; influenced by the angle from which the picture has been taken, the degree of cropping used, (excluding details which the image-maker considers extraneous), the colour rendition, and of course any manipulation done in Photoshop. The photographer may have his own political or sociological reasons for producing the image, he may have used a particular type of equipment,<sup>4</sup> and he may have intended the photographs to only make sense as part of a series or sequence of shots. Taking all this into account, the documentary image or series of images is still the most powerful method of illustrating a story, whether it is the story of a humble wedding, or an earth changing world event.

Documentary photography has had an interesting history. The earliest documentary photographers were possibly just travellers who could depict on film the places which they had seen. In effect these photographic records provided the 'lower classes' with a visual opportunity only previously available to those who could afford 'the Grand Tour.' These early travel photographs, often referred to as 'armchair travel' were acquired by editors and authors to illustrate books and magazines<sup>5</sup>. One photographer who contributed to this new desire for images from far flung places was the Parisian Eugene Atget, who between 1890 and 1914 captured some 10,000 images depicting the street life of his home city, an activity which had the effect of illustrating it for thousands of people.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Curto, the lecturer in Photography at DuPage College, Illinois, suggests that there are two types of photography, DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY and CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY. He further suggests that these two types of photography are different in almost every way, insisting that there is a difference between photographs that are taken and photographs that are made. So, he reasons, the choices that photographers make before they release the shutter (having found or created an image) will influence the outcome.

<sup>4</sup> For example the photographer of a building may use shift and tilt lenses.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, for a photograph to be a document which can be seen by others, it needs to be disseminated. The early daguerreotype photo-processes prohibited this. From 1851, when F S Archer invented wet-plate collodion plates photographs could be made in the field, developed reasonably quickly in the field and then multiple copies made from the negative upon return to base. This was a huge boost to travel reportage.



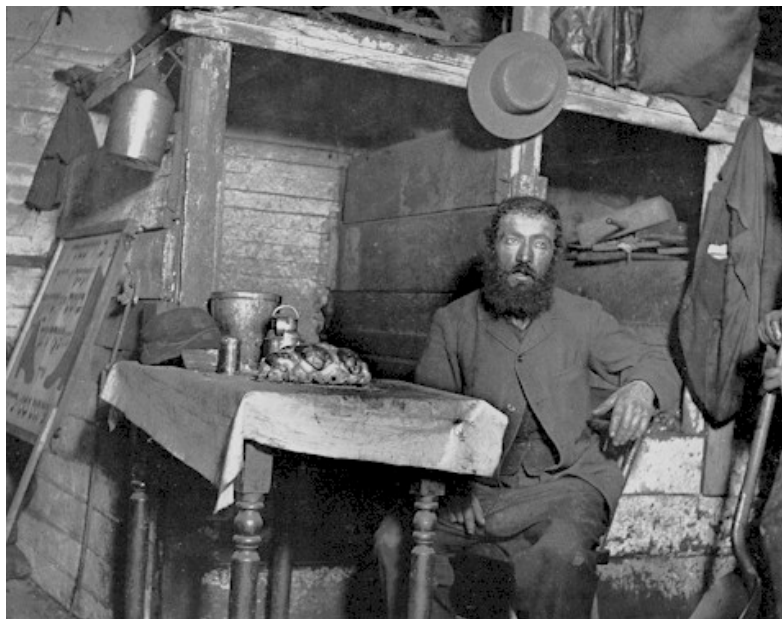
Atget's Paris

Photography also developed into a method of disseminating news. The old adage that, 'A picture is worth a thousand words' was proven many times over, as documentary photographers became

visual news reporters. The adage was tested and proven by photographers like Jacob Riis, who found that when delivering lectures on poverty in New York, he could gain the sympathy of his audience, and provoke them to action when he showed photographs illustrating what he was saying. He began a project in New York to photograph poverty, and in so doing built up a lasting photographic commentary of his time which became a major work, paradoxically entitled, "How the other half live." Curtis, (History Matters website) wrote:

Riis and Hine shocked their contemporaries with dramatic images showing the human consequences of unchecked urban growth and industrial excess. Previous to their work, photos of the city celebrated urban architecture or provided perspectives that emphasized the city's bustle, traffic, and commerce. The sensational impact of Riis's and Hine's photos was no accidental by-product, but rather the very essence of their photographic fieldwork.<sup>6</sup>

These early documentary photographers worked under conditions and constraints which are relatively unknown to modern photographers. They had equipment which required long exposures and efficient flash was yet to be invented.<sup>7</sup> One of the major sociological developments which drove documentary photography forward at this time was the invention of the half-tone photograph for use in publishing. Magazines and newspapers became hungry for images to illustrate their stories, and press photography grew and developed.



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<sup>6</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> In the modern era of digital imagery and motor driven cameras, it is easy to forget that photographers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine operated with equipment that imposed constraints on their actions and their ability to craft a candid scene. To gain access to the alleyway in Bandit's Roost, for example, Riis had to command his subjects to be still lest stray motion ruin his photograph. Perhaps he negotiated with the alley dwellers himself; more likely he relied on his companions to help set the scene while he unpacked and set up his camera equipment. Riis' famous after dark photographs required even more planning and preparation. To capture the dim tenement interiors that so shocked his audience, he employed a new flash powder, which resulted in the often startled expressions of the people he photographed and the depiction of interiors with harsh lights and shadows that may have exaggerated their actual appearance. (Quotation from History Matters – Interpreting Photographs)





Documentary Images of New York poverty by Jacob Riis

Another major influence on the development of documentary image-making was the decision by the American government to commission a number of photographers to record the effects of the Great Depression on rural life. Set up in 1935 to combat rural poverty, the efforts of the Farm Security Administration were largely unsuccessful due to its policy of 'collectivisation,' – bringing groups of rural workers together to work on large state owned farms, whereas the farmers expected and demanded land ownership. Its one great success was its collection of images, showing the ravages of poverty on the people of the land.<sup>8</sup> The official Library of Congress website states:

The images in the Farm Security Administration... are among the most famous documentary photographs ever produced. Created by a group of U.S. government photographers, the images show Americans in every part of the nation. In the early years, the project emphasized rural life and the negative impact of the Great Depression, farm mechanization, and the Dust Bowl.<sup>9</sup>

Among the photographers who worked on the project was Dorothea Lange, a commercial photographer who started to work for the FSA in 1935. She was appalled by the level of poverty in

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<sup>8</sup> As the USA became involved in the Second World War, the photographers of the FSA were re-commissioned to depict early images of the war. Among the most poignant of these were images of Japanese Americans being interned following the attack on Pearl Harbour.

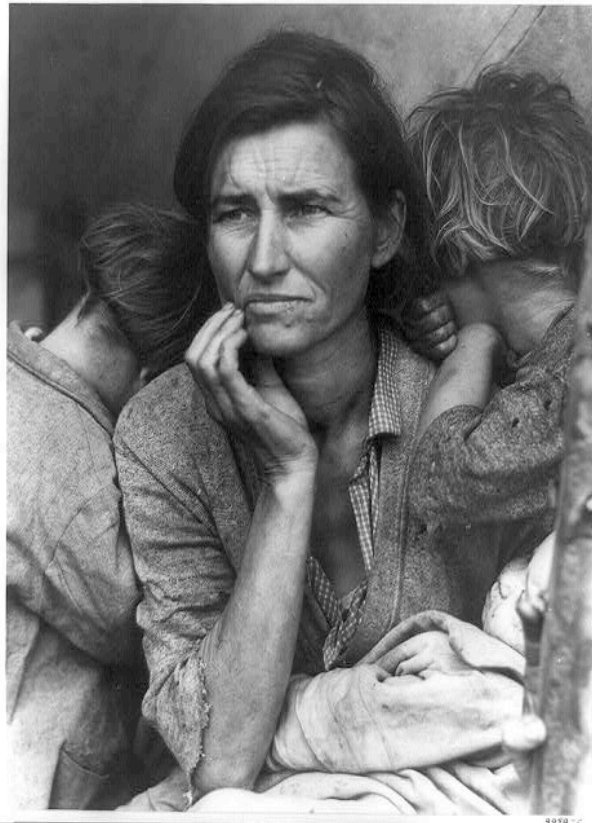
<sup>9</sup> <http://rs6.loc.gov/fsowhome.html> Accessed 26/1/09

rural America, and sought to show both the desperation and the dignity of the people. Lange

(Cited on the 'Photo-quotes' website) said,

I am trying here to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated. About death and disaster, about the wounded, the crippled, the helpless, the rootless, the dislocated. About finality. About the last ditch.<sup>10</sup>

Lange's iconic image is the 'Migrant Mother' – a woman she met in California.



Lange's philosophy of documentary image-making was summed up when she said (ibid):

Hands off! I do not molest what I photograph, I do not meddle and I do not arrange<sup>11</sup>

In more modern times, photographers like Steve McCurry have been producing images which show us other peoples of the world. His photographs of Afghan women are deeply saturated and full of colour, but would almost pass for portraits, set as they are, out of the context of their environment. Yet in the face of the woman and in her tattered clothes, perhaps everything is said that would ever need to be said.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/ShowQuotes.aspx?id=146&name=Lange,Dorothea>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/ShowQuotes.aspx?id=146&name=Lange,Dorothea>



So, documentary photographs, either single images or sets of images in a presentation are intended to acquaint us with something, a place we haven't seen, an event which the photographer has witnessed, a story that needs to be told, a situation that should awaken our conscience, or a way of life, a culture that we need to understand. Just how successful the efforts of the photographer are in his task will be determined by a number of factors, not least whether the object portrayed is actually worth being photographed as a document in the first place. But how does the photographer decide?<sup>12</sup> For the documentary photographer some judgement will be required. To tell a story, whether in one single image or a series of images, the demands of reportage will help decide which shot will be taken and will survive into the final series or make it to the paper. The photographer will need to be aware of what point he wants to make, what his editorial guidelines demand, and what emotion or response his image may evoke in the final viewer.<sup>13</sup> In order to work in fast paced situations and often suddenly changing circumstances, the photographer must develop a 'sixth sense' to enable him to instantly recognise a potentially

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<sup>12</sup> Usually, this decision is a highly subjective matter, where an artistic or conceptual photographer will simply see or create something that he likes, and then plan and make the photograph.

<sup>13</sup> This is even so in 'reportage' wedding photography, where the photographer sets out with a preliminary vision of capturing certain emotions in the couple, for example love and happiness, he will want to follow the brief set out in his commission, and he will want to evoke surprise and happiness and delight at the final presentation of the images.

suitable image, which ticks all the relevant boxes, and to press the shutter button at exactly the right moment. Cartier-Bresson referred this as 'The decisive Moment'. He wrote (Cited on 'Photography Quotes' website):

To photograph is to hold one's breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It's at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.<sup>14</sup>

The photographer Nick Ut was photographing scenes from the Vietnam War when he captured this iconic, Pulitzer winning image:



As in other types of photography, one of the most powerful tools in the documentary photographer's skill-base is the ability to frame and crop images, a technique that can exclude distracting material and create a more powerful, pleasing or shocking image.

If the documentary photographer has such a huge influence over how images are made, it begs the question, "How can the end-viewer assess what is really a truthful objectivity." In other words, how are documentary photographs meant to be viewed and interpreted? Jeff Curto in his 'History of Photography' podcast entitled 'The Photograph as Document,'<sup>15</sup> defines documentary photography as images that are often, but not always in a sequence of images that explore a subject in a way that the public expects to be factual and accurate. Bearing in mind the statement

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/ShowQuotes.aspx?id=98&name=Cartier-Bresson, Henri>

<sup>15</sup> <http://photohistory.jeffcurto.com/>

of Ivins (above), a viewer might be right to ask some questions before he accepts that the documentary photograph is a factual statement of reality. James Curtis cautions against naiveté when viewing an image purported to be documentary:

Historians often regard photographs as a critical form of documentary evidence that hold up a mirror to past events. Public and scholarly faith in the realism of the photographic image is grounded in a belief that a photograph is a mechanical reproduction of reality... when we encounter an historical photograph, "shot for the record," we often treat the image as the product of a machine and therefore an objective artifact.<sup>16</sup>

Curtis and Curto both assess the objectivity of the document only after consideration of a number of criteria::

1. Who took the photograph? This is an important starting point for historical referencing. Curtis (ibid) states:

Documentary photographs are more than expressions of artistic skill; they are conscious acts of persuasion... Far from being passive observers of the contemporary scene, documentary photographers were active agents searching for the most effective way to communicate their views.<sup>17</sup>

For example Jacob Riis' images were made purely for 'political influence' and any images captured by him must be seen in this context. Riis even 'cheated' by hiring young street thugs to re-enact crimes which were frequently committed on the streets. This image by Riis entitled, 'A Growler Gang in Session' is an example:

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<sup>16</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>



The problem of interpretation is obvious. If Riis had posed young children in a doorway, to illustrate homelessness (as it is alleged he did) who was to know if the children were actually homeless or not?

This driving influence in the work of some documentary photographers to effect social or political change through their work needs to be borne in mind while such work is being assessed.<sup>18</sup> In America, where free expression was permitted, the impact of photography on social conditions was considerable. Riis' images of the poor of New York caused the future president, Theodore Roosevelt to begin a series of reforms of the poor-houses which the police department managed in that city. There was a direct consequence of Riis' photography – it provoked a reaction among the political classes.

Another documentary photographer whose images are deliberately aimed to achieve social reformation is the Brazilian, Sebastiao Salgado, who in the 1970s photographically recorded the ravages of famine in Africa. Salgado (Cited on Photoquotes.com) said:

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<sup>18</sup> It is significant that when a totalitarian regime establishes control over a state, very often its first act is to oppress the arts; painters, poets and writers, there is a fear of free expression with respect to social commentary.



What I want is the world to remember the problems and the people I photograph... I don't want people to look at them and appreciate the light... I want them to look inside and see what the pictures represent, and the kind of people I photograph.<sup>19</sup>



This image by Salgado is typical of his work. Using a wide angle lens to get up close to the subject, the central subjects are pulled up close to the viewer, and the image is charged with tension and anger; the eye being drawn to the centre of the image, where the man's hand has grasped the soldier's rifle. The eyes in the image are on this action; it is the focus of the event.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/ShowQuotes.aspx?id=496&name=Salgado,Sebastiao>



Photographs by Salgado are often visually beautiful<sup>20</sup>, even though the subjects of the image are totally impoverished, as are these Sudanese refugees, a fact that may well even give them a dignity that life has denied them, an achievement which emulates that of Lange, in the Migrant Mother image.

Another question that the viewer of documentary photographs must consider is why and for whom the photograph was taken. What if the photograph was taken as part of a commission, say for example for a commission from a government agency? Would the photographer then be expected to, and perhaps even pressurised into providing images that promoted the commissioning body's agenda. Lewis Hine worked for the National Child Labour Committee in the USA, an organisation which had a direct bearing and influence on his work. Curtis (ibid) stated:

...the immigrant workers in Hine's photographs were portrayed as worthy of viewers' sympathy, exploited and yet still dignified, deserving candidates for U.S. citizenship.<sup>21</sup>

The modern dilemma posed by this criterion is whether an image taken by a photographer 'embedded' into a military unit will be truly objective in his work, or will simply supply visual

<sup>20</sup> Salgado has been criticised for his decision to sell some of his images as gallery prints, and has been accused of profiteering from poverty.

<sup>21</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>

propaganda. Even the BBC, who use embedded journalists, admit that the practice is disputable.

The BBC website reads:

The practice of embedding remains controversial and has drawn stiff criticism from some quarters. The relationship between the military and the media has always been uneasy, due mainly to the fact that each has sharply differing aims. While the military sees propaganda as a weapon in itself, a journalist's role is to cut through the half-truths and report both sides of the story.<sup>22</sup>

2. How was the photograph taken? Given the constraints of early cameras the first documentary photographers employed differing techniques when making pictures. Many would direct the characters in the image; at the very least would ask them to stand still during the necessary long exposures, would bribe landlords to gain access to dismal lodging houses, and would use flash when it became available. Walker Evans, who was one of those photographers who eschewed the notion of any such arrangements before exposure, must himself have made some pre-exposure preparations.



Curtis, (ibid) to illustrate this point critiques the above image made by Evans in 1936, in which he has inserted a white man into an image of a black ghetto, perhaps to present an illusion of racial harmony which was far from accurate.

Viewed by itself, this photograph suggests a degree of interracial harmony in Vicksburg. As for the white man, he may have been Evans's tour guide, in which case his insertion is actually an act of dominion, one which the black men are powerless to

<sup>22</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2885179.stm>

3. What can companion images tell us? Curtis suggests that it is unusual for a documentary photographer to make just one photograph of a subject, but rather he would take a series of images, later selecting the image which best relates to the photographer's sense of the scene. But often the photographs which are rejected in this process provide a context for the chosen photograph. For example, Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' if stood alone would make less sense than when it is understood in the context of the FSA project.<sup>24</sup> Cornell Capa realised the importance of setting images in the context of a collection when he wrote:

"Isolated images are not the most representative of my work. What I do best are probably groups of interrelated pictures which tell a story. My pictures are the 'words,' which make 'sentences,' which in turn make up the story."<sup>25</sup>

4. How was the photograph presented? John Harrison at his recent lecture at SERC made it clear that a huge part of selling a documentary image was to append an appropriate caption. The importance of captioning has been well known throughout the history of the discipline. Riis titled his images in such a way as to evoke a response in the people who would view his slideshow. For example, his image, 'Bandit's Roost' would be little more than a street scene featuring a group of underemployed people, without the caption.

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<sup>23</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> The FSA required their photographers to submit all images captured, so the photographer had no editorial control over the outcome, the result being that the collection is a tremendous resource of contextualised images, rather than a collection of individual images.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/ShowQuotes.aspx?id=158&name=Capa,Cornell>



Bandits' Roost (J Riis)

Curtis writes:

Lewis Hine ... Like Riis, Hine placed great faith in the power of accompanying words to drive home the point of his images.<sup>26</sup>

Walker Evans refused to caption his images at all, but when he included a series of photographs featuring the home of a family called Burroughs, the photographs contrasted so much with the description of the home and the family's domestic routine, outlined in the text by James Agee that it became obvious that he had actually rearranged furniture and family personal effects before shooting, an example of how the presentation of images explained the photograph – although perhaps not to the photographer's advantage.

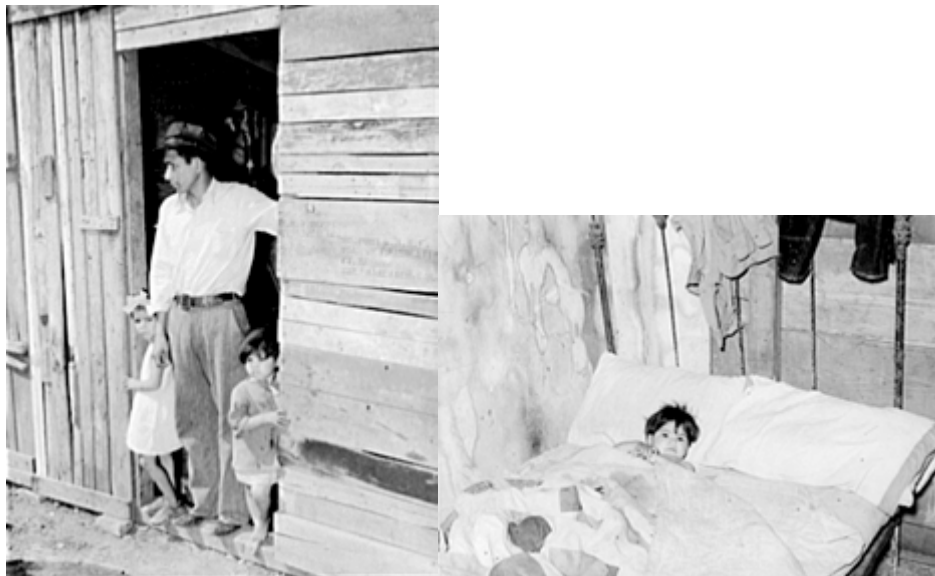
5. How are models interpreted? When documentary photographs contain human figures, the question must be asked, "How did the photographer interact with these people, to include them?"

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<sup>26</sup> History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/photos.pdf>



Were the images captured surreptitiously, in the manner of Cartier Bresson, or did the photographer go up to the person and ask them to pose for the photograph?<sup>27</sup> Curtis illustrates how this can sometimes help us to see what the photographer's intention really was. In a series of photographs depicting poverty among Mexican families during the Great Depression in the USA, Russell Lee was able to get into the bedroom of a sick boy to capture an image of a little boy in bed. That these images were posed is evident from the fact that the same small boy is standing at the door of the house in another image from the same set.



Mexican Family, Russell Lee



Belfast Migrant Woman

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<sup>27</sup> In the Belfast Streetscape project in the Golden Mile, I included a photograph of an immigrant woman begging in the street. This photograph was taken following a little bit of bargaining, and a few coins changing hands.



But what of the future of documentary photography? The digital revolution has taken photography by storm. We are using methods and equipment that only a few years ago we would never have dreamed of. Jeff Curto, in his podcast (Camera Position #64, Old Tools)<sup>28</sup> suggests that photographic technology will continue to change, until the equipment and file formats that we are using today will be rendered obsolete, like the old film cameras and Poloroids rendered obsolete the wet-process collodion and albumen printing.

Wedding photography too has changed dramatically, with many photographers moving from the formal, posed style, demanded by the restrictions of the old medium format cameras, to a more casual, reportage style of work. The photographer can also preview images, checking for correct exposure and framing immediately after the exposure is made. The result of this is that there are many more photographers offering their services, whether good or bad.

What effect will these changes have on documentary photography? Newspapers who once were sources of income for freelance photographers are now actively seeking submissions from what they call, "Citizen Journalists." They realise that the proliferation of digital imaging has put a camera on every street, and that members of the public are often unwitting witnesses whose photographs captured on their mobile phone or their digital compact usually come free. Are not their images as valid as social records, (while not as examples of photographic perfection), as those of the professional press photographer? John Swarkowski recognised this, and wrote,

"Photography has learned about its own nature, not only from its great masters, but also from the simple and radical works of photographers of modest aspiration and small renown."<sup>29</sup>

The internet too has become a magnet for photography. Not only has the internet been a sales tool for professionals, but it has given amateurs an entry into selling images for profit. Stock image sites like iStockphoto have countless numbers of images, many posted by amateurs, which can be downloaded and used cheaply. On the other hand, social networking sites like Facebook

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.cameraposition.com/>

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Curto, J on Podcast, [www.historymatters.jeffcurto.com/](http://www.historymatters.jeffcurto.com/)

and Flickr encourage members to post photographs. People post photographs of everyday life, and these are, surely, a record of simple events. One recent contributor to Facebook decided to photograph his breakfast, and posted it on the website Twitter.<sup>30</sup> It is, to all intents and purposes, a social record of a breakfast in 2009 western society. It is a documentary photograph.



Given the opportunities for publishing photographs that now exist, the easy, low-cost availability of digital equipment, and the anticipated further advances in image making technology, there is every reason to suppose that the day many soon come when every interested person can be a documentary photographer in his own right, whose works will be viewed by a potential audience of millions of people.

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<sup>30</sup> ([www.twitpic.com/19ito](http://www.twitpic.com/19ito)).

## Conclusion and Evaluation

So, when does a photograph become a document? When it is captured in the split second of the camera's exposure, or when it is printed and becomes the reality before the human eye, or when it is disseminated and exposed to the critique of others, in a book, postcard, or electronically? Or is the answer to the question entirely subjective, as each viewer looks at the image, and evaluates it, either seeing the story or message of the photographer, or simply admiring the beauty of the scene or the technical ability of the image-maker? The answer is difficult to find. As viewers of images, we want them to be true, and we are seemingly predisposed to assume that '*the camera never lies.*' But can we trust the motives of the photographer, the pressures that are upon him to produce a 'commissioned image,' and the techniques that he has used. How has he captioned the photograph to influence our mind before we view, and what way has he arranged subjects to make his point. Can the camera ever be trusted again?

Still, documentary photography is one of the most interesting and absorbing categories of photographic practice. In that 1/250<sup>th</sup> of a second, when the shutter opens and that brief shaft of light enters the camera, something momentous happens. The decisive moment has come and gone and will never come again, but may be remembered for ever. It is about real life being recorded; about making a document, a record of something, whether that record is a single shot encapsulating a moment in time, or a series of deeply perceptive shots in a narrative that will shake the conscience of decision makers and opinion formers or a straightforward record of the ordinary and the banal.

It has had a startling and provocative history, and although the moving image has challenged its supremacy in reportage in recent years, it will continue into the future through the work of dedicated professionals who want to achieve more than the one or two images captured for an

editorial deadline, and by the army of amateurs whose snaps are the real-time story of everyday life.

The examination of this subject has deeply challenged me. I have learned to evaluate my own photographic documents, and to get a new perspective on social photography, to value more the act of making photographs for family record. It has given me a much-needed sense of direction and purposeful self confidence in my own work.

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