

Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1

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**The Greenroom:
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“documentary”:
authority
and
ambiguities
Olivier Lugin
Olivier Lugin

If, today, we wish to have a better understanding of the fluid concept of “documentary,” there is unfortunately little point in returning to the past. The word has always encompassed varying images and attitudes and given rise to contradictory definitions. All that a retrospective of this type reveals is how much the inconstancy of the term is rooted in its history. No one has ever known with certainty what the term “documentary” actually entails. When referring to film, a rough definition seems possible though illusory (roughly speaking, everything that is not fiction), but it is hard to identify what would be the opposite of “documentary” in photography (what should we call fiction in photography?) and, consequently, the exact scope of the term. However, the vagueness of the word has by no means been a drawback. It has contributed to its success and dissemination, since a very wide range of creators have legitimately succeeded in appropriating the “documentary.” And this freedom of use has been one reason for its impact and theoretical efficiency for almost a century.

The one element that the countless definitions have in common is the very general requirement to respect the subject matter, the desire to reveal “things as they are,” to provide reliable, authentic information about them, avoiding any embellishment that might alter the integrity of reality. From then on, viewpoints have diverged at all levels—whether relating to how a description may adhere to reality, which subjects are worth recording, and how to use the gathered material. Nevertheless, three main options are clear: the encyclopaedic/educational trend, the heritage/conservation line, and the social/political approach—to which can be added aesthetic considerations affecting all three, as we shall discover.

The first two options—the educational and the conservational—most colored the term “documentary” in the first decades of the twentieth century. At that time in France, the “film documentaire” referred to a cultural or travel film of an edifying character. In the field of photography, the incipient debate concerning the term related to encyclopaedic archiving and inventorying cultural heritage. Of

course, social reformers and charitable institutions were already using photography to arouse public awareness, to denounce urban poverty and worker exploitation; however, that usage of images for combative purposes was not as yet primarily associated with the category "documentary." This social and political significance came incontestably to the forefront in the 1930s, and it continues to prevail today. This semantic shift has been largely prompted by the Anglo-Saxon influence. In the inter-war years, British and American authors adopted the French word "documentaire," first in the cinema and then in photography, turning it into "documentary." They used it to designate work geared to the non-stage-managed contemporary world, and social reality in particular. Accordingly, the term acquired an extremely positive moral and political connotation associated with the quest for truth and social commitment. Thanks to its transition into English, the word made its way into the aesthetic debate and returned to Europe with this added moral value (admittedly continuing to have a wider connotation in German and French than its American equivalent).

However, the other interpretations never completely disappeared, not even from Anglo-Saxon texts. And so, paradoxically, the first British theoreticians of the documentary film, John Grierson and Paul Rotha, did not select a political filmmaker such as Dziga Vertov as the "founding father," but Robert Flaherty, a rather romantic and nostalgic researcher.⁰¹ Similarly, in photography, it was an archivist also focusing on the past who was the one to play the tutelary role: Eugène Atget. The succession of names associated from the thirties onwards with Atget, with a view for creating in retrospect a "documentary tradition," also covers the most irreconcilable standpoints: Henri Le Secq, Mathew Brady, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Atget, Paul Strand, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, the Farm Security Administration... The record is as arbitrary as it is illogical. What, basically, is the connection between the conservation approach of

⁰¹ In a report on Flaherty's film *Moana* published in the *New York Sun* on February 8, 1926, John Grierson was the first to use the term "documentary." He was to examine it in more detail and codify it in countless subsequent pieces in the 1930s.

Atget (photographs to keep old things alive), the desire for social reform of Hine (photographs to bring about change), and the more literary pursuits of Evans?

Great differences also emerge in methods for ensuring a faithful representation of reality: Should the creator vanish behind the subject in apparent neutrality, or is his presence necessary for the credibility of his evidence? Is aesthetic formalization desirable or reprehensible, does it reinforce or crush the documentary content of the image? Does the "true documentary" not consist of an accumulation of evidence that is defined entirely by its subject matter, without necessitating the slightest creative work or signature from the maker? Is it not, by definition, a joint project? Must the images suffice as such or should their meaning be shaped by editorial guidance and supporting text, serving to alter and subordinate them? This leaves so many questions, which have not as yet been answered, but which will be briefly reviewed below in their historical perspective.

Accordingly, what might seem to be the documentary project's fundamental weakness—the nebulous definition, the assorted approaches—has undoubtedly been the chief factor influencing its viability: a propensity to keep on discussing its methods and goals, reinventing ways of providing a faithful, correct description of reality. That distinguishes it in particular from photojournalism, with which it has sometimes been identified. In fact, photojournalism's codes have remained unchanged for decades, and it has exercised scarcely any self-criticism concerning the construction of authenticity of its images and the appositeness of its procedures (the snapshot format as the undisputed symbol of immediacy). Quite the opposite, the documentary has proven to be permanently in a state of flux and crisis. As soon as one group believed they had found a descriptive formula guaranteeing veracity, another would cast doubts on it and seek a more suitable method to do so. This is the infinitely productive paradox of the documentary: when its basic principle—"to show things as they are"—seemed to restrict

the genre to a repetitive duplication of reality and deprive it of any opportunity for development, this very simply-formulated principle actually gave rise to a constant exploration of new procedures and forms. To quote the title of a famous article by Allan Sekula: for an entire century it has been a matter of constantly "reinventing the documentary."⁰²

改造的纪录片

In 1906, the first *Congrès international de la documentation photographique* was held in Marseille. It was the first attempt to discuss and organize the interest in the visual document, which was emerging in photographic circles as well as in libraries and archives. In Marseille, the issues addressed included the very concept of the documentary image and the "conditions which photographic prints should meet in order to constitute a document."⁰³ Even then it was difficult to come up with clear answers. And the discussions were less about the actual images than about their processing: preservation, registration, classification, numbering, or indexing, with a vision for creating an international network of image banks, eventually containing all the world's documents. The assumption was that no single image was "documentary" as such, neither as regards subject matter nor form, but that it *became* documentary in the way it was incorporated in an effective archive system. This framework, this ordered availability, was felt to be what transformed an image into a document—a dormant entity, awaiting a user who would give it its meaning, the user—and not the producer—being the central figure in documentary work.

This archival approach, which prevailed in official photographic circles, contrasted the view emerging concurrently in the field of social reform. One example can be found in the work of Lewis Hine, who in the same year embarked on his famous project with the National Child Labor Committee. For him, a documentary photograph

02 Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," (1976/1978) in *Photography Against the Grain. Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

03 "Congrès de la documentation photographique," *Bulletin de l'Institut international de Bibliographie* 11, nos. 1-3 (1906): 79.

was not so much an archival record as a discursive element, part of a semantic construction determined by the photographer. In addition, it was not aimed at some hypothetical future audience, but at a contemporary one, whose ideas should be changed immediately. So on the one hand it meant slow and open dissemination—a repository for material, which other people should activate at some unspecified time; on the other hand rapid transmission to a specific target group—images which are not waiting for an audience, but address it with a specific message through selected channels. In this way, according to Hine, activating the documents, organizing their contact with the public by way of posters, publications, or projections, was part of the documentary photographer's own prerogatives. 权利

Apart from this contrast between archive and discourse, the 1906 congress also revealed another problematic pair regarding the history of the documentary: the relationship between the documentary project and art, a matter that proved extremely complex from the very start and that had never been reduced to a simple antithesis. Oddly enough, among the organizers of the congress and the defenders of photography as an archived item, there were some proponents of "pictorialism," i.e. photography merely to serve an aesthetic purpose. For them the two fields were not contradictory. Faced with supposed trivialization of photography brought about by increasingly industrialized professional practice and more frequent domestic use, they sought to fight on two fronts to restore to the medium its lost legitimacy and esteem—on the one hand, making the photograph an object of pure contemplation, and on the other, reverting to the edifying objectives of early photography, when it was perceived as a means of universal education and knowledge. In that context, the documentary project formed the counterpart of photographic art—the other side of the same coin, sharing the goal of restoring its declining legitimacy.

Since then, the frequently professed purpose of the documentary has been to pursue this unchanging goal: to regenerate the medium, to restore to the images their lost purity and authority.

重新创造媒介，恢复图像失去的纯洁和权威。

Accordingly, after the 1930s, the documentary became less of a denial of existing photographic or cinematographic art but, rather, its *Aufhebung*, that is, the documentary overtook those art forms, while also serving to perpetuate them. This was a way to start from scratch or, to paraphrase Dziga Vertov in the context of cinema (though equally valid for photography), to “renew” these two art forms time and again.

In the period between the two world wars, this project was solidified. Only then did the idea of a documentary “genre” come about, backed by a coherent theory, aesthetic and history, with its lineage and great ancestors. Many of the contemporary critics were of the impression that vague, unconscious practice had suddenly developed self-awareness and taken on the structure of a “school.” This process was based on a combination of two phenomena, which may appear contradictory at first glance, but actually coincided. The first was the increasing social and political empathy in the wake of the miseries of the Great Depression. The second was the acknowledgement of photography and film as legitimate art forms. **首先，在大萧条(Great Depression)的痛苦过后，社会和政治上的同理心日益增强。二是承认摄影和电影是合法的艺术形式。**

The economic crisis following the 1929 stock market crash generated a new aspiration towards testimony and commitment in all fields, a renewed desire to face the problems of the world and everyday reality.⁰⁴ This craving was reflected in literature, the fine arts, and in theatre too. However, it acquired especial importance for recording media such as film and photography, whose privileged relationship with reality suddenly put them in a dominant position. From the activism of the Film and Photo League in New York to state projects like the film unit of the GPO (General Post Office) in London, or the photographic campaign of the FSA (Farm Security Agency) in Washington—all were striving to focus attention on the world and its shortcomings. But if that kind of attitude was to constitute a “school” and an accepted alternative for a certain “state of the art,” in turn it had to be part of the history it opposed:

04 See William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

only by entering the artistic discourse and institution could the documentary give itself a legitimate means to reform such art and refocus it on the world. In the cinema, the non-fictional film (which had been around since the very start) could only appear as a genre to John Grierson when he started viewing it in relation to the prevailing aesthetic of Hollywood films or the experimental cinema, which he considered to be futile and formalistic. That also applied in photography. In 1938, the art historian, Beaumont Newhall, could refer to a “documentary tradition” as an alternative to photographic art only because he had opened the art museum to it, both categories sharing now the same aesthetic space.⁰⁵ Moreover, Grierson and Newhall sought to distinguish the documentary both from “elevated” and purely aesthetic practice, as well as from the platitudinous reporting of current affairs or the banal, edifying document. They introduced a statutory hierarchy between “lower categories” of non-fiction (contemptible matter for rapid consumption) and a “higher” one, the documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality,” which, like art, was made for the long term and for a thorough knowledge of the subjects in question.⁰⁶

Therein lies the paradox of the documentary project, even today. “Documentary” is often taken as the antonym to “artistic,” yet it stems primarily from the artistic field—beyond art, yet very much a part of it. Neither the theoreticians of the 19th century, who firmly believed in photography as evidence and reflection of reality, nor professional photographers intent on producing functional documents were concerned with drawing up a “documentary doctrine” of any kind. Only those seeking to find their place in relation to an artistic past and in an aesthetic debate felt that need. Consequently, they have given the genre a double objective of regeneration: to reform art and society simultaneously, **to purify photographic and cinematographic aesthetics, while at the same time helping to improve the world.**

05 Beaumont Newhall, “Documentary Approach to Photography,” *Parnassus* 10, no. 3 (March 1938): 2–8.
06 Grierson on *Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 11, 78.

This ambivalence of the documentary vis-à-vis art—should it stand aloof from all aesthetic expression or can it only exist as art—has substantially marked the history of the genre. The differences surrounding this issue led to the split in the Film and Photo League in 1935–36, with one group of the opinion that any aesthetic formalization weakened the documentary impact and the other group believing it actually to be a condition for its effectiveness. These contentions also generated considerable strain within the FSA, where very diverse options were supposed to be reconciled: increasing public awareness of the hardships experienced by small farmers in the Depression, keeping records of the vernacular American culture, and promoting first-class photographic works. Walker Evans in particular complicated matters by upholding the somewhat delicate position of an aesthete, although he supported the purest of “documents,” arid, impersonal images of the type often encountered in archives or heritage surveys. His entire oeuvre is in effect based on the paradoxical idea of a “documentary style” whose simplicity of form, apparent neutrality, and transparency were not only intended to serve the topic but also the image itself, which should be all the more forceful in its own presence because it would seem to have been stripped of any formal affectation. In this way he has formulated a curious, self-reflective definition of the document, suggesting that the photographer might efface himself in favor of the subject, representing things “as they are” and yet claiming this impersonal recording as a personal creation.

In fact, Evans’ provoking paradox reflects a friction frequently encountered in the documentary: the conflict between the creator’s desire to become ^{次要的} subservient to the subject and his or her own affirmation as author. The documentary project actually signifies an ever sensitive, ever different ^{均衡} renegotiation of the authorial position. In the 1930s, this new equilibrium between the artist and the world seemed to be possibly reflected in the highly regarded practice of team work, as if the partial withdrawal of the individual into the group were the natural consequence of his retreat in favor of the

subject—another form of self-abnegation vis-à-vis the world. In his 1938 article, Beaumont Newhall expressly recalled that tradition of collective work dating from the 19th century, ranging from the French Mission héliographique to the explorers of the American West. It was especially praised in leftist circles, where the primacy of the collective prevailed and where even the individualist activity par excellence—artistic creation—was expected to submit to it. In Germany in the 1920s, some even proposed to abolish the signature from photography completely, introducing absolute anonymity, as if the author’s absence were the only consistent attitude for a documentary doctrine which truly accepted the artist’s withdrawal to the background vis-à-vis “things as they are.”

This radical approach, however rational it may seem, never caught on. On the one hand, it contradicted Hine’s conception of the documentary as a discourse, ^{演说, 论文} which inevitably assumed there is a “subject” behind it, a voice, turning the idea of immediate access to things into an illusion. But, more importantly, the approach did not allow for the fact that the domain of documentary would remain the domain of art and would continue to rely to a great extent on its authorial logic. In that context, Evans’ somewhat flimsy definition—of things “as they are,” but bearing a signature—would continue to prevail. Even today this seems to be the natural condition of the documentary photograph and film, regardless of the debate or questioning it generated.

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