

Documentary photography

To call a photographic project 'documentary photography' implies that photographs are taken to create a valuable, visual record. Documentary photographs create a historical document or something that will become one. The word 'documentary' was coined in the 1920s to describe the new kind of films being shown in cinemas about the exploration of the world and the lives of little-known people.

Documentary photography now describes long-term photographic projects that are self-initiated: a photographer commits a number of months, years or even decades to a story, driven by his or her passion and obsession rather than a commission, and often funded by other commercial work or by grants and awards. There is the tradition that documentary photographers live with their subjects, immersing themselves in their culture and lifestyles, sharing their experiences, and that the pictures are taken with the full trust of the subjects.

'For me documentary photography is less a matter of subject and more a matter of approach. The important thing is not what is photographed but how.'

Dorothea Lange.

Many documentary photographers stay in touch with their subjects long after their projects have been completed, returning to visit the friends they made and rephotographing the continuing story. Some photographers choose to photograph as if they were an invisible observer; others photograph as a participant in events.

Opening the eyes of the world

Shortly after the invention of photography, governments came to regard photographic records as a valuable addition to written records. Photography became routinely used in police work. Mugshots of offenders were taken to establish criminal records, full face, right and left profile becoming the standard. Soon social reformers saw the possibilities of photography as a means of educating people about poverty and exploitation, realizing that photographs offered proof of conditions hidden from the public eye.

In 1890 a book of flash-lit photographs called *How the Other Half Lives* focused on the appalling living conditions of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Produced by Danish-born photographer Jacob Riis, the publication of the book caused public outcry and was the catalyst for social change. Whole city blocks were torn down to be replaced by public parks and playgrounds.

Lewis Hine also believed that published photographic evidence could effect change. He photographed the wretched working conditions of the poor across the whole of America in the early 1900s, in particular child labour in factories. He was sponsored in his efforts by public and private organizations concerned with the welfare of the poor. The rubber stamp used on the back of his pictures read 'Lewis W. Hine/Social Photographer'.

Must-see documentary photography

- Bruce Davidson's Brooklyn street-gang project and subway series.
- Farm Security Administration photographs.
- Roger Mayne's pictures of street life in the North Kensington area of London.
- Chris Steele-Perkins's pictures of 'Teds'.
- Oscar Marzaroli's pictures of Scotland.
- Danny Lyon's motorcycle-gang pictures.



Chris Steele-Perkins, *The Teds*, 1976

Documentary photographers often focus on subjects that are not the stuff of headlines. Chris Steele-Perkins spent three years photographing the English Teddy Boy scene in a project later published as a book.

The term documentary photography came into common use after pictures taken by photographers working for the Farm Security Administration were first published in America in the 1930s. The FSA, a division of the US Department of Agriculture, hired a dozen photographers – including Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange – to provide a stream of potent photographs that could be distributed to newspapers nationwide, which showed the lives of the rural poor at the height of the catastrophic drought that had hit the Southern states during the economic depression of 1929. The FSA project, which lasted over five years, was conceived as 'a pictorial documentation'. It successfully used photography to open the eyes of the American people to the plight of the people pictured.

In Britain a project known as Mass Observation took place between 1936 and 1947. It was the largest ever investigation into the culture of one country. Fifteen-hundred observers were sent all over Britain to document the minutiae of everyday life. Mass Observation looked at normal people doing the things they do each day – going to work, spending time with their families and socializing. The aim was both to reveal and preserve for a future audience the daily rituals of people who are never interviewed, written about or make the news, and to educate by contributing 'to an

increase in the general social consciousness'. The photographers working for the FSA and Mass Observation paved the way for modern documentary photography.

'I believed that pictures should disclose the unacceptable: poverty, bad housing, hunger and that my pictures would help eventually to make the world a better place.'

Humphrey Spender, photographer for the Mass Observation project.

Documentary films

Before there was even a word for it, photographer and filmmaker Frank Hurley made one of the world's first documentaries, taking as his subject Australia's first Antarctic expedition. When the party became stranded by winter storms, Hurley filmed the extreme blizzard conditions, telling the story as a heroic battle between man and nature. He went on to produce the extraordinary photographs of Shackleton's later Antarctic trip. Many photographers have made documentary films, including William Klein, who made them about the boxer Muhammad Ali and the singer Little Richard.

Giving voice to the unheard

Documentary photographers often have a mission to educate and enlighten, choosing to look at issues that are typically not the stuff of headlines but instead daily life, creating indelible images of subjects that are at the periphery of our vision. Their photos reach a wide audience through publication in books or in exhibitions.

The Brazilian Sebastião Salgado exemplifies this approach. His images give a voice to his subjects' stories – some of which had rarely if never before been heard, opening the eyes of the world to the daily toil and struggles of his subjects. Salgado has photographed in over sixty countries, focusing mainly on people who survive from day to day, labourers, refugees and famine victims. His extraordinary series of pictures taken in 1986 of the lives of the open-pit goldminers in Para, Brazil, showed a vision of hell. Massive, muddy pits swarm with ragged workers, some of them children. Some climb huge homemade ladders, burdened with sacks of earth, others dig by hand, all under the eye of uniformed armed guards. This self-initiated assignment, carried out over a month-long period, shook viewers, who could not believe that such barbaric conditions could exist in the late twentieth century.

Martin Parr, *Sedlescombe*, 1998



Martin Parr brought vivid colour to documentary photography in his medium-format, close-up photographs of Britain's daily social pageants and ceremonies. The activities of drinking tea, Tupperware parties, seaside holidays, suburban DIY, Union Jack flags and '99' ice cream cones are photographed larger than life, sometimes with ring-flash, enlarged to billboard scale for exhibition.

Parr mostly photographs with sly, knowing humour, tongue firmly in cheek. Sometimes his vision is a cruel one, the opposite approach to that of many documentary photographers. On applying to join Magnum – a process Parr described as being akin to trying to join the Freemasons – he found himself denounced as a fascist by veteran war photographer Phillip Jones Griffith for mocking the people he photographed. Parr scraped in by one vote; he is said to be Magnum's biggest current earner.

Where Robert Frank (see *Telling a Story in a Book of Pictures*, p. 100) looked at the iconography of American life in black and white – jukeboxes, cars, bars, and the Stars and Stripes flag – the English photographer Parr uses throbbing colour in his dissection of British iconography. Parr is an obsessive collector and former trainspotter and birdwatcher. He collects examples of the ways in which pictures can be used – postcards, mugs and plates with photos on, prostitutes' cards found in phonebooths, and even crisp packets.

In his book *Autoportrait*, a series of portraits of Parr taken in theme parks by street photographers from around the globe, he appears as the Mr Bean of photography, a weedy nerd in spectacles bewildered by the world.

His books include *Sign of the Times*, *The Last Resort* and a black-and-white series, *The Weather*. He has also compiled a strangely compelling book entitled *Boring Postcards*.

If you like Parr's work, have a look at John Hinde's postcards and the photographs of William Eggleston.

Bruce Davidson spent two years, 1966–68, photographing people living in Harlem's East 100th Street in New York, having initially approached the local citizens' committee with his idea for the project. He deliberately chose what was known as the worst block in the city and photographed in black and white with a large-format view camera. Davidson produced a wonderfully intimate series of gentle, dignified pictures of people struggling in poverty. He photographed not as a stranger with a camera, but as a trusted friend welcomed into people's homes.

Roger Ballen (www.rogerballen.com) spent almost two decades photographing life in the small villages of rural South Africa. He revealed the unknown poor in troubling and provocative pictures which evoke the barrenness and emptiness of the South African countryside and the mindset it has helped to create in its inhabitants. His pictures are square and black and white, taken with a medium-format camera, often with vivid flash. Ballen created each picture in partnership with his subjects, viewing the small, claustrophobic square of space that he'd selected through the lens of his camera as a theatre stage on which he invited the people to perform, with their pets and children.

After taking grainy and grim pictures of his own adolescence, followed by time in jail, Larry Clark was able to talk himself into getting a grant to photograph the lives of young American teenagers. Although by then over twice their age, he photographed them as if one of their gang, saying, 'They're living for the moment, not thinking beyond that, and that's what I wanted to catch. And I wanted the viewer to feel like you're there with them.' His disturbing snapshot pictures are shockingly 'there with them', exposing the reality of teen lives that are casually entwined with hard drugs, sex and guns. (See *The snapshot*, p. 157.)

Telling the story of war

'Believing that one picture is worth a million words, it is the task of the still photographer to try to expose the injustices that humanity perpetrates on itself. Images of the agonies and ecstasies of war must still have the ability to shock and, one hopes, to sway public consciousness.'