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REVISITING ROBERT FRANK AND THE STATUS OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 21-ST CENTURY¹

One of the most outstanding visual observers of the 20th-century, Robert Frank, who died in 2019, left behind a spectacular body of photography documenting what he and critics called ‘real’ American lives. When his most influential work, ‘The Americans’, was first published in 1959, critics did not immediately recognize Frank's genius. Nevertheless, his style that celebrated ordinary Americana strongly characterized by the Beats’ spirit eventually became one of the most celebrated photographic books of the 20th century. Having taken pictures of the low, the white, the suburban, the African-American, "scenes that have never been seen before on film" (Jack Kerouac, 1958), Frank changed how documentary photography represented society and its people. This paper revisits Robert Frank's work observing his legacy in the 21st century and the impact his different yet authentic approach to photography has had on contemporary American photography, focusing on the course documentary photography has taken as a result of advanced technology and accelerated distribution of information. The study discusses contemporary influences that alter the way documentary photography is produced, distributed, stored, shared and observed, as crucial determinants of photography's status and function to represent realities of 21st century America.

Keywords: documentary photography, Robert Frank, Americans, auteur, 21st-century, legacy, movements

“The humor, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness of these pictures!”

Jack Kerouac, Introduction to The Americans

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Only a few of those who are familiar with the work of Robert Frank are not familiar with the words Jack Kerouac used to articulate the genius of Frank's photography in the Introduction to *The Americans*, published in 1959. This seminal book, renounced by many at the time of its publication, but praised by others for its unconventional approach to social documentary, became the most celebrated photographic book of the 20th century. Upon the death of Robert Frank in 2019, the book has been revisited by museum curators, art historians, and theoreticians to discuss the genius of his photography, because Frank's death marked the end of a specific auteur period of documentary photography in America and provoked a discussion about the impact *The Americans* had on photographic stylistics and the reader/viewer. More significantly, perhaps, Frank's death has raised questions about how much of his documentary approach influenced his contemporaries and followers, who contributed to that extraordinary period that covers most of the second half of the 20th century, and whose work goes ostensibly against the grain of conventional picture-taking. Yet, however, the crucial question that has been raised by many remains how much of Robert Frank's documentary approach has survived in the 21st century. Frank's photography marked the potential of social documentary that influences the kind of photography reading and interpreting understood within the realm of an auteur's personal and intellectual contribution, whose primary interest is to document American society and its people. However, whose vision of reality also contributes to more significant recognition of American identities—the practices of their invention and re-invention in a particular moment in history. Frank, with his contemporaries like Walker Evans, Daniel Arbus, or Garry Winogrand, created a body of work that allowed critics, museum curators, and readers to be confronted with the kind of photography that Susan Sontag in 1977 identified as a medium that “enters and enlarges our notions of what is worth looking at and what [we] have a right to observe” [13; P. 3]. Furthermore, while doing this, Robert Frank and others began to acknowledge the kind of America that goes beyond what is real, insisting on the intensity of authenticity providing a deeply personal account of America.

This study attempts to revisit Robert Frank's work via emerging discussion about the function of auteur photography in contemporary social documentary, focusing on how Frank perceived, framed, and projected Americans. It also attempts to explore how much of audiences' ability to respond to this kind of photography has changed with the advancement of technological devices that transgress the accomplishment of photography of the second half of the 20th century. It is especially with personal devices such as camera phones that allow the immediacy of high-quality snapshots providing agency to photographers with reasonably satisfying results. It will also be briefly pointed out here that the function of documentary photography has changed tremendously and shifted

away from the photographer's frame of reference towards a much more independent status, reflecting contemporary discussion and criticism that is more concerned with understanding photography as a message and form of agency [3; P. 15] rather than a medium of reproduction as it was described by Sontag in her influential 1977 publication *On Photography*. Due to these technologically advanced devices and their impact on the value of information, the focus on photography has been re-centered from the author towards the picture, which ultimately becomes the message. Moreover, it is this shift that also changes our understanding and appreciation of documentary photography that has, in the 21st century, been more concentrated on the potential impact on the lives of people than the photographer's genius and vision. Returning to photography's primary function, which is to record reality, picture-taking as a process that can have powerful results remains a persuasive tool in describing our lives. But, in the 21st century, it is more about how the final image is distributed and interpreted that contributes to how a photograph is accepted.

Documentary photography

In order to understand documentary photography, it is essential to think about how images are constructed, that is, who made them; who edited them; who created the narrative describing the pictured moment (most often via captions); who exhibited the picture either as part of a more significant exhibition or individually; what has been left out of the frame and why to name but a few of those aspects that contribute to how documentary photography is placed and its message understood in context. However, the most powerful photographs are often observed and studied as individual agents, created by authors who, using the camera, mediated their own vision of reality. Among the most influential documentary pictures that have changed how people understand social realities was Matthew Brady and his picture *Federal Dead on the Field*, produced in 1863, altering American perception of the Civil War. The image exposed a moment of death without previous romanticizing of war's purpose, dismissing the potent significance of heroism as an attribute of the traditional depiction of war. In 1907, Alfred Stieglitz, another prominent photographer, took his iconic modernist photograph called *Steerage* that he forgot about in his drawer for another four years. Stieglitz, despite being the leading representative of the Photo-Secessionist movement,¹ created this truthful and unapologetic take on the world that records the division of huddled masses into categories of people upon their

¹ Photo-Secessionism was a movement which attempted to use the artistic potential of photography. Alfred Stieglitz was the leading representative, but the work of other photo-secessionists such as Gertrude Käsebier or Edward Steichen was also highly influential. For more on this, see *Camera Work: The Complete Photographs* by Alfred Stieglitz [3] or Miles Orvell, *American Photography* [4].

arrival to America. Or powerful images of two prominent photographers of 1930's America, Dorothea Lange, and her *Migrant Woman*, and Walker Evans' *Allie Mae Burroughs*, both taken in 1936 documenting the impact of the Great Depression on rural communities; or later in the 20th century, Nick Ut's highly controversial *The Terror of War* published in 1972 that brought the until then invisible Vietnam War to the attention of all Americans.

The genre of documentary photography developed as an imminent result of the fascination with photography's capacity to record reality, as a kind of instinct to give the medium pragmatic quality, efficiency, and purpose. Enhanced by democratizing impulses of the second half of the 19th century and with the contribution of photography to vernacular culture, the public became the all-the-greater focus of photographers, an intuitive result of the sweeping second wave of immigration. Photography, although momentarily, developed into the absolute medium with the ability to document both individual and social realities. Moreover, having the capacity to create and document family history no longer dependent on a painter's artistic expression—the existence of which was nonetheless determined by one's social status—photography revolutionized the way people observed their presence within their immediate environment. With a more significant effect, documenting American society allowed the creation of public images for public consumption, for example, in the studios of Napoleon Sarony, or the 'new historian' as Matthew Brady was often referred to for his documentary of the aftermath of the Civil War. The invention of photography harmonized with the desire for romantic notions derived from Romanticism and supported the national narrative resting on the American mythology of the Frontier with its contribution to documenting the American West. Among the most accomplished photographers who promoted these romanticized depictions of the American Frontier were Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson. Nevertheless, genuinely documentary photography developed with photographers' desire to document social life as a direct consequence of political actions taken at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis¹ embraced the camera as a medium that helped visually communicate the need to reform late 19th century American society, especially in New York. Using photography to draw attention to public matters and "record social phenomena in order to inform" [5; P. 3], they set the criteria for what later began to be identified as social documentary. Ellis and McLane assert that another criterion of documentary production is the "use of non-actors ("real people" who "play themselves") [original brackets, 5; P. 3]. However, the documentation does not necessarily have to be only func-

¹ Robert Frank shared with Jacob Riis the perspective of an outsider. Frank was Swiss-born, Riis of Danish origin, and this allowed both of them to seek value in mundane, often overlooked, everyday America.

tional. As the authors explain, documentary production seeks to accomplish a twofold result – one with an aesthetic value and the other with an effect on attitudes. When it comes to describing the aesthetic value of documentary, the emphasis is on one’s professional skill instead of a personal style and communication rather than expression [5; P. 3]. This is what makes Robert Frank’s documenting approach in *The Americans* stand out – the unique combination of both his professional skill and personal style unobtrusively documenting mundane subjects that have puzzled critics and curators, raising questions about the relevance of Frank’s documentary effect.

Robert Frank’s photography

Examining Frank’s influences, it was Riis and Hine whose “endless fascination” with the street can be traced in his work [10; P. 121]. Still, it was the influence of Paul Strand’s photography that became crucial for Frank’s personal exhibition in his work and provided a “clearer starting point” [10; P. 121]. Strand, although a Photo-Secessionist, manifested, like Frank, his genius through “strong and direct communication” that accompanied his focus on photographic purity and naturalism that was evident in much of his work [12; P. 33]. However, it is the rawness, almost brutal directness observed in the depiction of his subjects where Frank’s *Americans* echo Strand’s work the most. Like Strand’s portraits of people (e.g., *Blind*, 1916), “devoid of trickery and of any ‘ism’; devoid of any attempt to mystify an ignorant public, including the photographers themselves” [Stieglitz in Roberts, 12; P. 121] *The Americans* was the direct expression of its period, “produced in all their brutality” [Stieglitz in Roberts, 12; P. 121].

The influence of Photo-Secessionists on Frank is also evident in the form of the production. Meagan Paetzhold, in her commentary on Frank’s photography, asserts that Frank “revolutionized documentary photography, embedding the snapshot aesthetic into visual culture” [11]. However, while the prevalent aestheticism of one of the most dominant periods of photography in America, and one that preceded Frank’s output– the 1930s –was the orchestrated focus on the portrait of rural Americana celebrated via the photographs of Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans, it was the urban snapshot photography of Stieglitz that Frank’s works reveal. It is the snapshot aesthetic that creates the ambivalence in Frank’s body of work that urges viewers and critics to ponder the line that divides documentary photography from the artistic and raises questions about how much creative input is needed to disregard a photograph’s documentary quality. From the historical point of view, the snapshot aesthetic, allowed by the availability of the early Kodak camera starting in 1888, revolutionized and eventually transformed the production and use of photography. When the camera finally

became a medium of representation in the hands of ordinary people, it marked the beginning of ordinary life exhibition stripped of the staged effect in front of it. Despite the lack of professional skill, many iconic works emerged as a result of these unintentional snapshot experiments, such as *Woman and Dog on Beach*, New York, 1920, author unknown. Frank understood the potential of snapshots and exploited this aesthetic and this later influenced other grand American photographers such as Garry Winogrand or William Klein, who owe the social documentary tendencies observed in their work to snapshots of everyday public realities.

Nevertheless, while using the snapshot aesthetic, it is Frank's frame that determines the constructed vision reality and provides the specific value of it. As Stuart Hall explains, "photographic representation is not simply a 'record' of a given moment, for it cannot be innocent of the values and ethics of those who worked within it" [8; P. 76], meaning that photography should be understood as a body of practices and aesthetic values because it "focuses our attention on the interactions between the conceptions of photographers in constructing their images and the uses to which their photographs are put" [8; P. 80]. In *The Americans*, Frank provides evidence or proof with a specific aesthetic value that contributes to how 'real' Americans are represented, hence observed. Although rejected upon its publication as a too inadequate record of Americans, too raw and bitter, the book was later praised because of this particular approach that makes people not only observe individual pictures but one that allows them to witness the scene, when the observer feels what it is to be an actual witness [Stryker in Hall, 8; P. 83]. Situated in a historical and cultural context, Frank's *Americans* account for the kind of America, and Americans, who, in 1955 and 1956, when Frank took the pictures, were essentially part of the observing crowd rather than being observed. Turning the camera from stylized depictions towards the authenticity of the street created the paradigm that organizes Frank's work and ultimately gives it the characteristics of social documentary. His raw and intensely authentic camera eye allows what Stuart Hall identifies as access to both feeling and facts [8; P. 86].

The Americans certainly changed how the Americans perceived themselves and how the world understood the potency of documentary photography. With his photographs, Frank not only revealed scenes of American life "that ha[d] never been before on film" as Kerouac declared in the *Introduction* (1959), but the "radical subjectivity" [Kurland in Paetzhold, 11] initially understood as crude reductionism combined with the authenticity of snapshot aestheticism. Referred to as un-American upon the book's introduction, like the movement of Abstract Expressionism – the artistic school Frank's work coincided with historically and artistically and is often compared to – it revealed new directions of recording American life and society. The deliberate randomness of Frank's sub-

jects acknowledges the traditional attraction of documentary photography to the underprivileged, or as Susan Sontag phrases it, “the nation's forgotten citizens” [13; P. 61]. Sontag compares Frank to Jackson Pollock because, like Pollock in his paintings, Frank placed himself in the middle of the picture, placing the viewer in the center too. Frank’s photographs resemble Pollock’s disregard of proportions, straight lines, and harmony only to exhibit freedom and release from the conventions of artistic production, whether that of painting or picture-taking [13; P. 61]. Sontag also proposes that while being in the middle, Frank maintains his position of a visitor who does not intend to intervene, only visits the photographed ones. While doing this, Frank creates this combination of high art and photographically recycled reality that ultimately becomes a documentary reproduction of the social realities of mundane Americana. However, this reproductory function of photography relies on the photographer’s genius that Sontag reveres, and one that is also highly characteristic of Robert Frank’s work, and whose significance has been, towards the end of the 20th century, severely compromised as a result of technological advancements that change patterns of distribution and appreciation.

Contemporary challenges to documentary photography

The onset of digital photography, its production, reproduction, distribution, and storage ultimately re-defined the nature of documentary photography. Virtual space accelerated the worldwide distribution of photography, reaching global audiences and, crucial for the development of photography – sharing platforms accessible to the public worldwide. With the public actively contributing to the evaluation and distribution of photography, critical value and authorship have been radically challenged. This transformation ultimately compromised what Stuart Hall calls “representational legitimacy”– a combination of the photographer’s interpretation with the objective photographic image [8; P. 87]– disregarding the artistic potential in favor of the informative. Moreover, one that is always re-treatable, reproducible, with the capacity to be revisited, hence re-invented, with the result of photography being “stored as information rather than an image” [10; P. 206]. Therefore, contemporary documentary photography is much less concerned with the photographer’s input. It much more ostensibly focuses attention on proving a point that has the potential to elicit changes, returning the discourse defining documentary photography back to its dominant function, which is to preserve a moment in time in order to interpret reality.

On the other hand, the photographer’s diminished value due to still-growing online distribution prompts photography to function as an independent agent, producing the value of evidence. An interpretation provided by Andrew Dudley identifies photographic representation as an asymptote to reality – a par-

allel experience that is forever dependent on reality – standing alongside reality or resembling reality through the subjective perspective of its interpreter [8; P. 138]. If photography is understood as this asymptote, and the effect of photographic evidence rests on our acceptance of verisimilitude, then the informative or documenting outcome of a photograph communicates what Stuart Hall calls “sense of continual present” [4; P. 85]. In other words, this continual present mediated by the camera elicits some guarantee of realism that is appreciated especially as a form of photo-journalist documentary, but which, however, in the 21st century seems to rely more on audiences’ acceptance of the guarantee. Upon the introduction of digital photography, critics began to be preoccupied with the negative effect of digitally reproduced reality, especially with misrepresentation, pondering whether photography as evidence of reality can continue being loyal to truthful representations [8; P. 206]. Entitled ‘post-photography’, the period when film photography was overtaken by digital, it marks radical change not only in the mechanical process of picture-taking, but implies post-production that becomes its considerable accessory. The contemporary cultural theorist, David Levi Strauss, examines the quality of such digital evidence supported by the informative value of photography that has become more often than not modified by anonymous subjectivism and advanced technology of the 21st century [15]. In his seminal essay *Photography and Belief*, Strauss questions the ability of photography to truthfully portray reality due to many contemporary influences that permit deformities and misrepresentation, echoing Stuart Hall’s observation that “the constructed nature of photographic social documentary relies upon more than mere visual fact-collection” [8; P. 86].

Nevertheless, this shift in emphasis from the author towards information (or the subject) repeats in cycles, as cultural production is affected by technological advancement. 21st century distribution channels and technologies accelerated the collapse of traditional definitions and boundaries and suppressed the author for the sake of information. This comes as a result of what Zygmunt Bauman identifies as “virtual connectedness,” achieved and manifested through “extraterritorial experiences” [2; P. 73] that make the traditionally designated areas disappear, and with increasing information flow, the need to pay attention to the original source and authorship decreases. When, in 1959, Robert Frank commented on his work in *The Americans*, he declared it was his wholly personal view he provided via photographs claiming that “you don’t photograph because you have a camera, you photograph because you have eyes and because you have something to say” [Frank in Baier, 1; P. 56]. It is those unprecedented opportunities that seem to affect everything about photography now. As Merry Foresta, art historian and former founding director of the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, asserts, “everything about photography itself seems to be at a crossroads: how it is made, how it is shared, and how it has changed and is

changed by the people who take and use images” [6; P. 9]. In light of this, Robert Frank’s idea of taking photographs because one has eyes and something to say has been replaced with the experiential use of the camera. To experience and share this experience with the rest of the world has resulted in the exponential growth in the demand for and production of photographic images [9; P. 12]. Social media contribute to this expansion tremendously with its users uploading and sharing over 100 million photos every day, producing pictures with camera-phones declaring that “We are all photographers now!” making the picture-taking process more democratic than ever before [9; P. 14].

Conclusion

With 21st century photography at a crossroads, it is also the definitions of photographic genres dividing it into the documentary, art, or commercial, that collapse. Taking a more global perspective that places emphasis on establishing “an equilibrium between style and subject, how to attract the eye to the often repellent subject matter but not distract the attention by self-conscious aestheticism” [10; P. 135], contemporary photography exhibits hybrid genres that have the ability to respond to both public and personal states of affairs – from entertainment to politics – primarily to explore the location and its original purpose [6; P. 7]. Nevertheless, it is photography in the hands of the public documenting events of immediate social transformation, with the potential to elicit changes, that has become ultimately neglectful of its author. This course that documentary photography has taken suggests what Orvell perceives as an effort to “move the record beyond the professional documentary” [10; P. 215], but simultaneously this effort implies the continuing faith in the medium’s power to convey reality with a kind of “inexhaustibility of meaning itself” [10; P. 215]. Nevertheless, that is not to say that contemporary documentary photography does not have auteurs who would exhibit Robert Frank’s legacy despite the assertiveness of the present-day production and distribution. In fact, Frank’s many followers today such as Katy Grannan, Alec Soth, Jim Goldberg, Elinor Carucci, Joseph Rodriguez, Nina Berman, Ruddy Roye, Eugene Richards, Justine Kurland, or Eli Reed, to name but a few, continue to guide viewers in Robert Frank’s perspective. They do that to observe what generally remains overlooked, providing what Frank himself called “a wholly personal view of America” [16; P. 56]. They continue to adhere to the belief that a photographer should only be a visitor to the crowd, and they preserve Frank’s loyalty to authenticity, which he declared with absolute visual impact that, as he himself explained, “should be such as will nullify explanation” [Frank in Baier, 1; P. 56]. This is perhaps the greatest of Robert Frank’s achievements – the many followers who continue with the legitimate representation of the 21st century American street producing photography

that, despite many technological challenges, carries the signature of an auteur, while they themselves remain invisible observers, mere mediators of the very experience.

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