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THE BURDEN OF VISUAL TRUTH

THE ROLE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM IN MEDIATING REALITY

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CHAPTER 4

The Heart of the Seer

Press Photographer ...
One who reports the news
to the general public through
the medium of photography
in newspapers, magazines,
newsreels and television.

—NPPA (1950)

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. ... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one.

—Ruskin (1904)

Lesson one is if you're an eyewitness to history, be clearheaded and impartial. ... In looking back on my 20 years with the AP, I realized that it was frequently impossible to avoid becoming involved in the story. ... Not only were we eyewitnesses to history, by our presence we influenced it.

—Arnett (1998)

A century ago, before the term *photojournalist* even existed, a news photographer's mandate appeared relatively simple: Get the picture. What he (and it almost always was a he) brought back was unquestioned, assumed to be visually recorded fact. In the year 2000, the photojournalist's mandate is more apt to be a self-imposed, personal goal to document events in the world than it is a news organization's motto. The photojournalist of the 1950s was challenged to produce technically perfect photographs; the photojournalist of the 21st century more often is expected to bring back significant content—the shot published may even be a technically poor grab frame from video. More important is a photojournalist's interpretative role:

> Photographers today do more than just record the news. They have become visual interpreters of the scene by using their cameras and lenses, sensitivity to light, and keen observational skills, to bring readers a feeling of what the event was really like. (Kobre, 1996, p. 322)

The role of the photojournalist in contemporary culture resonates in the psychiatrist's story about sanity: The mentally healthy person is one who has one foot in the circle of the rational and one foot in the circle of the irrational. A fine photojournalist plants one foot firmly within the visual pursuit of objective reality as we now know it—the most accurate recording of life events a human being can make. This person is keenly aware of a role as a professional eyewitness, working as proxy for the world at large. But a great photojournalist also plants the other foot firmly within subjective experience, with its passion, dedication, artistry, and drive to document people at their best and worst—and often with a clear point of view and at great sacrifice.

The photojournalist assumes the role of a covert artist with an acute social conscience, intent on naming the nameless, revealing the contradictions of life, and exposing the emotions people often would rather ignore or suppress beneath our supposedly rational culture. The photojournalist's tools and style apply a method that relies on conventions of seeing and believing derived from the positivist tradition. The work of the photojournalist abounds with an apparent realism that refuses to be subverted by conventions visible only to the educated elite. The result is an everyday, seemingly transparent, aesthetic realism dropping into our homes in a steady drip of blood, smiles, tears, triumph, and sorrow. The point of visual reportage is realism, not art. Yet, often, art is created in the process (Weber, 1974) and is what makes an image of photojournalism compelling. And although one can pick apart claims to realism in terms of perceptual subjectivity, this aesthetic realism of photojournalism may be the closest a person can get to recording the real. In fact, the lens of aesthetic realism can help see with vivid clarity what would be lost without its unique filters. The photojournalist watches for moments of "deeper purpose" (Mayo, 1989, p. 170, Note 2) latent in the everyday life of the world.

The heart of a good photojournalist also is like the mind of a critical theorist who constantly searches to expose the inadequacies of the status quo. Is this a romanticized view? Perhaps. For certainly many photojournalists are consumed by the consumer giant themselves, falling prey to the economic mandates and allure of capitalism, wrapped in the cloak of good income, mass media journalism, Pulitzer Prizes, and fame. But for others, the ideal of showing the world to itself, of exposing the corrupt, revealing the pain and joy of everyman, ferreting out the best and worst of life remains their raison d'être. Like many good journalists, they consider themselves the front lines of humanity's quest for a reasonably good life of fairness, justice, abundant food and care, and general equality.

This chapter examines those conflicting forces guiding the hearts and minds of today's photojournalists. Several themes emerge: the human being versus dispassionate observer, the watchdog versus voyeur, the reporter versus artist, the storyteller versus social scientist.

HUMAN BEING OR DISPASSIONATE OBSERVER?

A 1996 issue of *News Photographer*, the primary publication for professional photojournalists, addressed a core dilemma of the photojournalist: Are they human beings first, or professional observers first? One article tells the story of presidential candidate Bob Dole's fall while campaigning—and of the photographer who helped him. Many photojournalists following the campaign ran to take pictures of Dole sprawled on the ground. The best resulting photograph of a grimacing Dole ran several columns on the front page of *The Washington Post* the next day. Not long afterward, news analysts Sam Donalson, David Brinkley, George Will, and Cokie Robertson noted that the picture's use as front-page news was probably unfair to Dole, who, reportedly, grimaced only briefly before quickly getting up, regaining his composure, and joking about the incident (FOX, 1996). The fair view, they argued, was to show two photographs, one of the unique moment of the fall and a second of the recovered candidate. The analysts argued that to show the first without the latter would confirm voter fears about Dole's age, when, in fact, the real story was that Dole was in such good health that he was able to get up from the fall immediately. *The Washington Post*, in fact, did run both pictures, although the recovery photograph ran only 1.5 columns wide.

Agence France-Presse photographer David Ake is credited with saving Dole from serious injury by preventing his head from hitting the ground. Ake later declined other photographers' accolades that he had "'shown that we're caring people'": "I think any one of us would have done the same thing. It really wasn't extraordinary. The man simply fell on me." Reuters photographer Rick T. Wilking, who, according to *News Photographer*, "was

clear of the falling candidate and in no position to break Dole's fall, instinctively shot eight frames: "I took pictures that I didn't know I had until I looked at them later," Wilking said (Hale & Church, 1996, p. 23). Both photojournalists indicated they had responded instinctively—one in aid and one as witness. And emotion made the moment that "has become a powerful image" of the 1996 campaign (Hale & Church, 1996, p. 23). And Dole? Although the article noted that Dole thanked photographers for helping him, no mention was made of his response, either to the incident or to the photographs. Most significant, however, is that no matter what the context of the incident, what remains in public memory is the image of Dole grimacing in pain and lying on his back.

A related article, "Helping Hands of News Photographers," recounted 17 stories of photojournalists who helped people or saved people's lives—they could have been taking "great" pictures (Hale & Church, 1996, pp. 24–25). The story addressed the recurring criticism that photojournalists are more interested in getting their pictures than in the people they photograph.

WATCHDOG OR VOYEUR?

The same issue of *News Photographer* (1996) contained yet another relevant item, an inside-cover ad for Fuji film:

> When you're the eyes of the world, your film had better share your vision. Photojournalism demands that you capture life with absolute, unfailing accuracy. Without distortions. And without losing the drama. The question is, how do you do it? The answer, for thousands of photojournalists, is Fuji film. In countless situations, Fujicolor Super G. Plus is the perfect film. ... No one can say what each day will bring. But there is one thing you can count on. With Fuji film in your camera, you'll be bringing back the truth. Fujifilm. A new way of seeing things.

So, on one hand is the expectation that photojournalists be "the eyes of the world," to show the world what it cannot be present to see. Yet if photojournalists work to fulfill that expectation, they risk moving beyond what the public generally agrees is acceptable practice—into the role of the paparazzi stalking stars, the ambulance chasers at an accident scene, the merciless pack of competitors staking out homes of private citizens cast into public view through tragedy, the surreptitious intruders of backyards and funerals. What a photojournalist might believe is something the world

has to see—for example, the screaming face of a child who has just seen his brother's body pulled out of a treacherous lake—the "world" may believe should not be photographed, much less published in a newspaper. And the question remains: Does the world really need to see the agonizing photo, perhaps to make a public impact on a repeatedly dangerous situation, or are the photographer and editor really just a voyeur and a sensationalist going for a prize and more readership?

REPORTER OR ARTIST?

> The artist is forced by the nature of art to render the fluid, evolving world of his experience in static, fixed forms; to do this, he must find common terms in the contradictions of the world which presents itself to him, so that its disparate and contradictory elements can be represented in a single, unified whole. Any discovery of unity in contradictions is necessarily the realization of their human, historical purpose of "Tendenz" (tenor, tendency), since even the simplest acts of perception, such as the recognition of a face in a jumble of lines, require that we impose or discover the human significance in what is otherwise only a confusion of data. And the "timelessness" which we commonly recognize as a quality of great works of art is nothing other than such a discovery of the deeper purpose [emphasis added] latent in the historical moment itself to which the work points and out of which it arises. (Mayo, 1989, p. 170, Note 2)

Photojournalism has suffered from much the same debate as photography in general regarding its aesthetic and epistemological value to society. And as with photography, in some circles, the debate regarding its value as art versus its value as information is intertwined with debates about the nature of reality and how best to represent or express reality. The solution, however, is to avoid a dichotomous characterization. Even as great art can simultaneously inform, inspire, and repell, so can the great images of photojournalism.

Consider the work of the preeminent documentarian Eugene Smith. His "Walk Through Paradise Garden" was a spontaneous document of his children walking from darkness toward the light. Yet viewing the moment through Smith's photograph has inspired viewers beyond its real-world representation, to look via visual metaphor into the struggles of everyday life. Similarly, images of everyday newspaper photojournalism move and inform readers. I would even go so far as to say that every image of

photojournalism is "a metaphor for a part of life" (Newton, 1990), at once addressing the specific and the general.

STORYTELLER OR SOCIAL SCIENTIST?

The core of photo-documentary work is seeing and knowing, and then telling. Although the telling cannot possibly represent what was seen and known completely, the telling can communicate—if not "the story," then "a story" (Coles, 1997, p. 250). In fact, another way to examine the role of the photojournalist in society is to think of the journalist as an ethnographer, a researcher who often has less time to produce a report than most researchers. The journalist is charged with gathering information and reporting that information in a quick, accessible fashion.

Photojournalism is visual anthropology. Photojournalists study humankind through their reportage; they are professional observers. Anthropologists may bristle at this assertion, arguing that journalists are not social scientists. But the best journalists are indeed social scientists. They observe, they participate and observe, they record, they analyze, they immerse themselves in the culture of the observed, they report what they find, they reflect on the meaning of what they have seen. They have mass audiences and many more opportunities to influence how members of those audiences see and remember than most anthropologists. Differences in techniques rest primarily in the traditionally systematic nature of social science, which typically requires methodical, long-term investigation. However, using methods other than quantitative procedures or scientific protocols does not invalidate data (Blumer, 1969): "It is a tough job requiring a high order of careful and honest probing, creative yet disciplined imagination, resourcefulness and flexibility in study, pondering over what one is finding, and a constant readiness to test and recast one's view and images of the area" (p. 40).

Well-done photojournalism requires years of training, practice, and knowledge of a subject area. Consider the great war photographer David Douglas Duncan, who was trained as a Marine, served as a Marine, and spent most of his life studying men in battle. His books are rich, carefully considered, first-hand reports of the culture of war in the 20th century (1951, 1970). Similarly, his studies of the 1968 Republican and Democratic national conventions (1969) and of Picasso's life and work (1958, 1961, 1974) exemplify visual ethnography.

The dilemma of the journalist is that he or she often is expected to "bring back the truth" for publication in the next morning's newspaper or on the 10 o'clock news. If we could redefine journalism, whether verbal or visual, in a manner that openly acknowledged the relativity of individual perspective and presented information as the best available information, not as a conclusion or as "the truth," journalism would benefit tremendously. The benefit would be the integrity that accompanies doing what we say we do and knowing our limitations, as well as the potential engendering of public trust in what we say.

In *The Politics of Social Research*, Hammersley (1995) pointed to the Enlightenment paradigm as a primary influence on the perceived relationship between research and social and political practice. The paradigm "sees research as providing a theoretical basis for social interventions which will transform social life in a rational manner that is in everyone's interests … . It involves excessive expectations about the practical payoff of research" (pp. 141–144). Hammersley added that the "knowledge produced by research is always fallible." He stressed that, "what research offers is not a God's eye view but rather perspectives from particular angles, whose appropriateness can always be challenged" (pp. 141–144).

In many ways the photojournalist suffers from the same false sense of omniscience that guided a great deal of 20th-century research. But what a photojournalist does is to show "perspectives from particular angles." We just need to say, that is what we do. Further, Hammersley (1995) noted, "We should value knowledge about matters relevant to human life above ignorance about such matters. And such knowledge has value in terms of its relevance to our lives, irrespective of whether it can be shown to have a direct and powerful influence on our practical activities" (pp. 141–144). For the photojournalist, this can be interpreted to mean that the passion to make a visual record rather than to let something go unseen in a public fashion should take precedence as a form of knowledge production that may be relevant to people's lives. Not taking the picture, then, could be considered shirking the journalist's responsibility to society. Jarecke (1992), a Contact Press photographer who covered the Gulf War, took just such a stand. When challenged about the appropriateness of photographing the charred body of an Iraqi soldier, Jarecke (1992) asked, "How could I *not* take the picture?" To Jarecke, photographing the gruesome scene was imperative in order to show the world what occurred during the war, despite military censoring. Although Harold Evans (1992), then editor of *The London Times*, decided to publish the photograph, setting off a round of discussion about the war, the

photograph was not published in the United States until months after the end of the war. When a westerner first looks at the photo, the tendency is to assume it documents the remains of an American or European soldier. Only by reading the caption does one learn that the victim was Iraqi.

Hammersley (1995) offered one other opinion that sheds light on photojournalistic practice: "We need to recognize that research is itself a form of practice, in the sense that it is an activity pursued by human beings which takes place in the world, is directed towards a particular set of goals and uses social resources" (p. 141). Photojournalism, like research, is a form of practice, part of human visual behavior in contemporary society. Photojournalism practice can be seen as extending the eyes of the world into situations no one but those immediately involved would see were it not for the photojournalist. Yet, as a practice, visual reportage is directed toward "a particular set of goals."

As both a social scientist and a documentarian, Coles took the reader on an inspiringly honest, self-disclosing journey examining the photodocumentary tradition in journalism, film, and social science research. Coles' (1997) *Doing Documentary Work* explored these concerns in terms of documentary photography, which can be considered a form of visual reportage. He drew on his own experiences, the experiences of people who have been "studied," and the experiences of such wide-ranging luminaries as James Agee, Dorothea Lange, Orson Wells, Erik Erikson, and Oscar Lewis. Much of Coles' reflection has been written before: questions regarding editing, cropping, point of view, exploitation of subjects. But his revisit to old issues is strengthened by careful attention to those who have been the target of documentary, expressed through verbatim commentary.

The secret, Coles maintained, is that documentary is more about the doing than about the work. The purpose of the "doing," Coles courageously and unabashedly maintained, is humankind's desire "to know, then tell," to confirm our own humanity by "connecting with others during the brief stay we are permitted here" (p. 145). As evidence of this "documentary impulse," Coles pointed to young children. "This eagerness to catch hold of, to catch sight of, to survey and inspect, to learn and then convey to others what the eyes and ears have taken in," Coles wrote, is "an expression of our creaturely interest in exploration, narration." As in good psychotherapy, Coles maintained, good documentary is "jointly conducted." He cited Nietzche: "It takes two to make a truth." Yet Coles also considered documentary work "a narrative constructed by the observer ... meant not only to represent 'reality' but inevitably to interpret it," fulfilling "the reflective side" of service to others (pp. 249–252).

Coles addressed what he considered the dilemma of documentary, "the gulf that separates the reality of the subject from the point of view of the observer," by stressing the personal connections people make while "doing documentary." Citing Oscar Lewis' assertion that "maybe, sometimes, I hear a voice that says this is the way to go, here, not there," Coles affirmed his faith "in a writer's, a researcher's, a documentarian's subjectivity as it takes hold of objectivity, the muse our nearest approximation of God" (p. 248).

In his chapter on "Fact and Fiction," Coles compared "real" documentary content with the "imaginary life" of novels:

> Participating in, observing, reporting such "enveloping truth" is the "doing" of a continually developing "'record' ... made in so many ways, with different voices and visions, intents and concerns ... ."
>
> What emerges, if it is done successfully, is a kind of truth, sometimes (as in Tolstoy, George Eliot, Dickens; we each make our choices from among these storytellers) an enveloping and unforgettable wisdom that strikes the reader as realer than real, a truth that penetrates deep within one, that leaps beyond verisimilitude or incisive portrayal, appealing and recognizable characterization, and lands on a terrain where the cognitive, the emotional, the reflective, and the moral live side-by-side. (p. 189)

Coles' words and style, reminiscent of Agee's, may turn off the skeptical critic of documentary who believes that subjective perception and "otherization" preclude any benefits of trying to do reality photography. But, again, one must ask: What is the alternative? Is it to allow the fear of connecting poorly with someone, of telling someone's story inappropriately, keep us from connecting with them at all, just because the process is complicated?

Those who "do documentary," Coles concluded, give us "the heartfelt tenderness that informs an attention to what is, what happens—documentary work as a kind of love that becomes expressed in those words, those pictures, a kind of love that is handed over, thereby to others" (p. 268). Although great reportage can express anger and fear as well as passionate concern, it is "a kind of truth ... a terrain where the cognitive, the emotional, the reflective, and the moral live side-by-side."

A MATTER OF ETHICS

In the end, the fine lines between human being and professional observer, watchdog and voyeur, artist and reporter, storyteller and social scientist are drawn within the heart of each seer. Why does someone "do photojournalism"? How does he or she go about it? Another way to look at the issue is this: What is the most important moral problem faced by professional observers when they study the lives of actual people (William Stott, personal communication, 1990)? How does professional observation compare with everyday visual information gathering? Do we need to look at all? Is staring a problem? Are there appropriate and inappropriate ways to do it? Is appropriate staring a matter of good manners, a moral issue, or both? And the most basic of all: Why do we stare?

As others have noted before me, photographic observation is not dissimilar to hunting with a gun: A person is caught and frozen in the frame, much as other kinds of creatures are shot and stuffed for display—or consumed. However, a significant and obvious distinction between the two is that in the former, the organism is killed; in the latter the organism's reflectance during a given moment is captured. Does the way we do this really matter? Is there something inherently wrong about doing this at all? Or are such concerns once again sublimating those observed as passive victims of our vision, admonishing them to the status of victims who are incapable of resisting or presenting themselves with self-possessed agency? Have we simply created a supposedly more civilized form of subsumation?

The watchdog, the reporter, the social scientist, the artist, the human being, the storyteller, the dispassionate observer, or the voyeur—all those who stare in order to know—have the opportunity to stare with little regard for the person on the other side of the stare, or with little regard for the unethical process they facilitate. Or they have the option to proceed with the understanding that the best way to understand another human creature may be to enter an existential dialectic, keeping a careful eye on oneself and inviting the other human's participation in the visual dialectic. Then the observed has the authentic opportunity to become the observer, to "frankly, interminably" (Stott, 1973) stare at the world.

Well-considered observation examines how and why we look at others and what we look for. Good observation is an interactive, reciprocal venture in which the reality framed in the image is the result of a collaborative process. Good observation considers the looking process as important as the "reality" mediated via a photograph. It considers the rights and responsibilities of both the observer and the observed to participate actively and

consciously and to be as honest as possible, as well as the need for and reality of sharing locations of power in the process. It considers the relationship between the observer and the observed to be reciprocal, equal, and the reality that is recorded to be one that is mediated through interaction.

Well-considered observation acknowledges that every observer is privileged—someone who has set him- or herself apart—not just to watch, but to stare and to record what is seen. However, good observation also acknowledges that all agents in the process are active and that all agents are observers. This dialectic does not negate the photographer's awesome responsibility, whatever his or her professional frame: to remain conscious of the knowledge that the vision that gets recorded, the vision that is remembered, that enters the continuum of images over time, contributing to our individual and collective understanding of life.

As professional observers, we can take an important cue from the world of good manners: It's impolite to stare. Whether the "impoliteness" is ingrained as a matter of custom or as an atavistic tendency is a subject for another book. I can argue here that unconsidered professional staring has an element of immorality to it, that it is unethical—not only in terms of the kind of visual information we think we obtain and convey, but also in terms of human behavior and interaction. But, again, I ask: What is the alternative? Not to look at all? I think not. There are times to look and times to avert one's eyes, times to remember we are all human creatures, rather than professional and other. Good observation is like good conversation: It advances communication to the best of the ability of those conversing through a continual process of mediating knowledge. It listens and it speaks. Further, good observation invites, entreats, beckons everyone involved to enter the perpetual dialectic of visual conversation as a way of knowing, and of becoming known. If we can mature into a global culture that recognizes the photojournalist as a professional seer practicing a research method, as well as following the heart, we will go a long way toward releasing the photojournalist from the impossible expectation of absolute objectivity and toward an appropriate understanding of the profound wisdom to be found in the best images.