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The narrative power of photography: a ghost trail of memories

Abstract:

This paper examines the way in which, by telling visual stories about the world, photography is narrating the world. While it acknowledges that social communication is one of the defining characteristics of being human and narrative stories have long been a common and powerful mode for transmitting information, it also accepts that narrative is something far larger than photography. However, while there is much to learn from anthropology, myth and legend, history, literary theory, fiction and non-fiction, and illustrated books, this paper reflects on narrative, power and responsibility through the work of acclaimed documentary photographers, the engaged observers as storytellers. Right from the beginning, photographs have laid a trail. A ghost trail. They continue to lay a trail of memories that can be driven into the future – images that restore the past, bringing it back to life, images that, in many cases, do the job of the written word. A element of this examination is the extent to which photographs convey narrative independent of text – and the ways in which people use photographs to build stories and store memories.

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Narrative – photography – visual stories – social communication – power – responsibility

Introduction

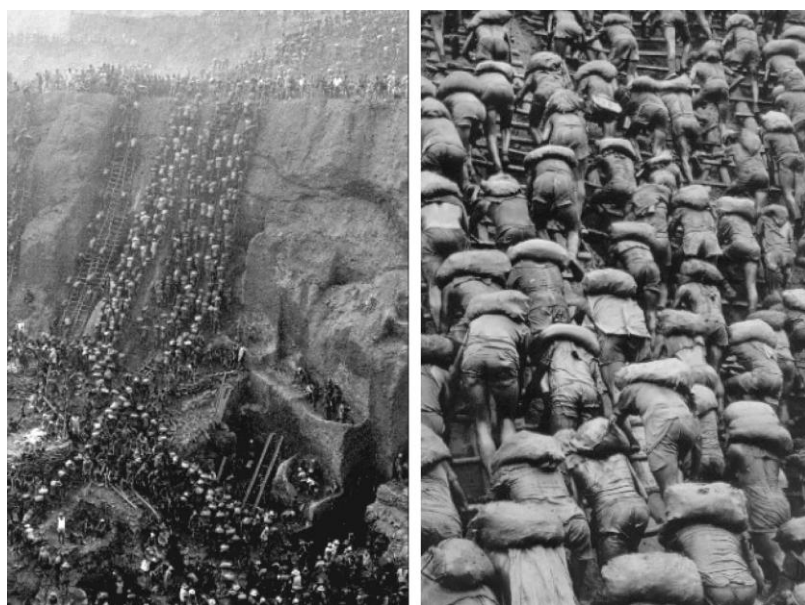
In the beginning, there were no words. But there were images – primordial and natural – and it wasn't long before people reproduced them on the walls of caves. And so the story unfolded from there: signs, symbols, paintings, words and, finally, photographic images. Photographs have become the ghosts that haunt us since images restore the past, bringing it back to life. As historian and academic Geoffrey Batchen says, photography replaces the immediate experience of memory with images that are historical, coherent, informational. But to continue to induce the experience of memory, a photograph has to be transformed. Something has to be done to it to continually drag it and us out of the past and into the present. The subject of a photograph has to be transformed from something that is merely seen to something that touches the emotions (Batchen 2005: 15). Photographs gather particular relevance when recording turbulent events – the 19th century, for example, was a period in which memory was put into crisis by the often bewildering changes wrought by political revolution and industrial modernity (Fritzsche 2001: 95). One might regard the invention and proliferation of photography as both a response to such memory crisis – and the same could be said about events of recent times. With its inherent ability to arrest time and substance, photography allows us to understand events past and present. As Jacobson notes, photography is a form of narration about a particular situation, event, person, mood or atmosphere (Jacobson 1998: Winter). Sebastiao Salgado is a storyteller of renown. So are James Nachtwey, Tom Stoddart, Don McCullin, Ron Haviv and David Leeson. So were Matthew Brady, Jacob Riis, Charles Annan, Lewis Hine and W. Eugene Smith. Riis and Annan's depictions of society in their time were as revealing as any told by social critic Charles Dickens while Hine's were on a parallel with those of the insightful novelist Sinclair Lewis. Nachtwey, Stoddart, Haviv and Leeson are among the greatest chroniclers of war and disaster on a par with Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Herman Wouk and Michael Herr. Salgado, Smith and McCullin devoted much of their professional lives to exposing the terrible conditions under which people lived in much the same way as Pulitzer Prize winner Upton Sinclair.

Salgado, Nachtwey, Stoddart, McCullin, Riis, Annan, Smith and the others are all photographers reflecting on the meaning of what they see in the manner of storyteller and social scientist. In the same way, this paper reflects on the bond between content and audience that exists largely due to an understanding that the camera is as much a tool of revelation as it is a means of record. As social scientist Barbara Harrison says, photographs provide visual clues; visual narratives may encompass the idea that other forms of narration are essential to the understanding of the image's context, content and meaning (Harrison 2002: 108).

Certainly, since its invention, photography has offered an exposé of society and the events that shape daily life. The development of documentary photography from its evolution to present times demonstrates that narrative images are an important part of contemporary visual storytelling and have embedded in them the power of record and recall. Photographs, as historian Graham Clarke points out, may be invested with a structure of codes and conventions that open a doorway on the world – the photograph

‘speaks very much to a sense of power in the way we seek to order and construct the world around us (Clarke 1997: 11).

Photographs of some of the world’s cataclysmic events demonstrate a storytelling power of such magnitude as to lodge for evermore in our minds and imagination. This paper offers as examples Salgado’s shocking photographs of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil showing the mine’s nightmare conditions, reminiscent of a Hieronymus Bosch painting; and Nachtwey, Stoddart and McCullin’s visual insights into the horrors of war and famine. Photography records the social scenes of time and place, it looks at society’s institutions – family, church, government, political parties, social clubs, labour unions – and reveals the manner in which they function, absorb the lives of, hold the loyalty of and influence the behaviour of people (Coles, 1982: June 15). As suggested, narrative in photography relates to the idea of context. No matter how complete or comprehensive a narrative appears, it will always be the result of including some elements and excluding others. Inclusion/exclusion is part of

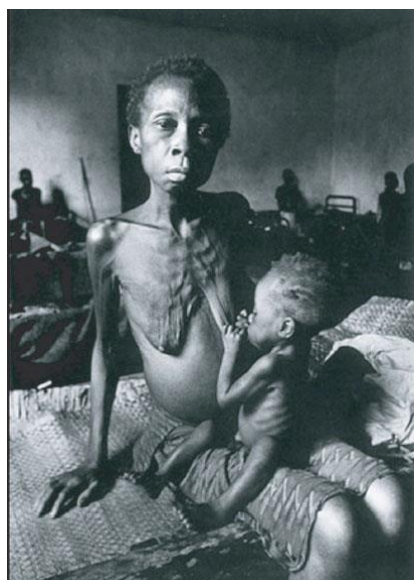


A metaphor for naked exploitation and oppression, Sebastiao Salgado’s series of photographs of up to 100,000 desperate men labouring in the Serra Pelada goldmine in Brazil in 1986 so shocked the world the Brazilian Government was compelled to act to improve conditions.

what construction is all about, but knowing what is best included or excluded requires an understanding of context. And an understanding of context requires visual storytellers to be highly proficient researchers, according to David Campbell (Campbell 2010: November). It is too demanding to expect an image to change the world; it’s the relationship with the context that sparks the change. As Campbell says, it’s difficult to pinpoint what exactly brings change because it is a combination of many different factors – maybe a photograph can’t change the world, but it can instigate the idea of change. When Tom Stoddart’s photographs of the famine in south Sudan in 1998 appeared in *The Guardian* with a telephone hotline for Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF received 700 calls and £40,000 was pledged on the first day. While the power and meaning of a photograph varies from person to person as it does with any novel, memoir, or essay, a characteristic property of photographs lies in their

lasting power to haunt the world no matter how much time passes. As with the novel, memoir, diary, journal or report, documentary photography mirrors the present and documents the future.

Visual storytelling about matters relevant to human life has value in terms of relevance to our lives, irrespective of whether it can be shown to have a direct and powerful influence on our practical activities, according to sociologist Martyn Hammersley (Hammersley 1996: 141). Pulitzer Prize winner David Leeson believes if there is an important story to be told, someone needs to tell it – and with a sense of mission (Halstead 2005: March). According to early documentary photographer Arthur Rothstein, a photograph is required to tell its part of the story as clearly as possible. ‘A camera can remove the superfluous and focus the attention ... in such a way that only the significant and characteristic aspects of a situation are seen’ (Rothstein 1944: April 10).



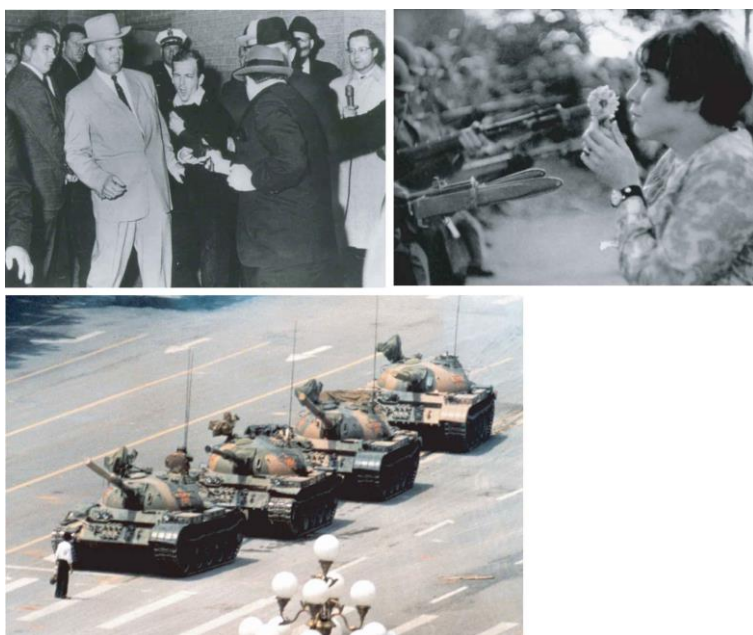
The story of famine: Don McCullin's photograph of a 24-year-old starving Biafran mother with her child. 1968

Don McCullin's celebrated images of famine and war say as much about the effects of cataclysmic events on the individual psyche as many books and reports of conflict and carnage. ‘I want those images to be with you, to contaminate your thoughts – they do mine’, he says (Edemariam 2005: August 6). Failure to bear witness suggests citizens choose to forget the world of obligation, says John Taylor, while on the other hand bearing witness is the work of memory, a cultivation of historical sense and feeling (Taylor 1998: 194).

The word ‘photographic’ has been used to denote the ultimate degree of truth since 1841. Many moments of time deemed worthy of the attention of visual storytellers have resulted in images that have been archived as documents of record for future generations. Now many of them are etched in the public's consciousness. Newton sees photographers as assuming ‘the role of the 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’ (Newton 2001: 50). Certainly we remember better what we see than what we hear; in fact, visual information may be more important to our

understanding of the world than verbally transmitted facts and figures (Graber, 1990, p.134). It's hard to imagine remembering anything without a visual trigger in, say, the form of flashbacks. As Newton says, photography supplies the flashbacks and shows them to us repeatedly, both implanting a form of reality and framing that reality for long-term memory (Newton 2001: 88).

According to Goldberg, although photographs of record may wander loose from their moorings at times, partly because they are seen to belong to everyone, recent history may be recorded as a series of photographic images that are engraved in the mind's eye (Goldberg 2005: 168). Memorable images that guarantee instant connection and social commentary include Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald in 1963; young pacifist Jan Rose Kasmir planting a flower on the bayonet of guard at the Pentagon during a protest against the Vietnam War in 1967; African American athletes giving the black power salute on the winners' podium at the Mexico Olympic Games in 1968; the nameless man in Beijing's Tiananmen Square standing in front of a column of tanks in 1989; the man falling headfirst from the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.



Memorable images that guarantee instant recall of a dramatic story: Bob Johnson's picture of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald in 1963; Marc Riboud shows pacifist Jan Rose Kasmir planting a flower on the bayonet of guard at the Pentagon during a protest against the Vietnam War in 1967; Jeff Widener's nameless man in Beijing's Tiananmen Square standing in front of a column of tanks in 1989.

There is a civil contract implied by photographs in that as consumers of images we bear witness through them. Kimmelman notes, 'A photograph is made hoping someone will look at it. It's a message tossed into the ocean of time, and how we read that message, whether indifferently or with compassion, can have moral dimensions' (Kimmelman 2009: June 3). Henry Luce, founder of the magazine *Life* that was shaped by photographs of record, perceived the camera as reporter, commentator and interpreter. One of Luce's best known photographers, W. Eugene Smith, made it his business to make visual comment; an unforgettable example of the powerful photographic essays for which he became famous is the series of haunting pictures he took in 1971 of the effects of mercury poisoning on residents in the Japanese village of Minamata. Perhaps the most famous of his Minamata images is 'Tomoko Uemura

in Her Bath' depicting a mother cradling her severely deformed, naked daughter in a traditional Japanese bathing chamber.



W. Eugene Smith's 1972 photograph of Tomoko Uemura awakened the world to the consequences of mercury poisoning caused by Japanese Chisso chemical factory dumping heavy metals into Minamata Bay.

More than a third of the Pulitzer Prize award-winning images over the last 30 years have done the job of visual storyteller, even watchdog; the other two-thirds of offer insightful information contributing to understanding. The 2012 images from the Associated Press of the horrific impact of the civil war in Syria give the war a human face; the 2008 photographs of despair after Hurricane Ike show the humanitarian disaster in Haiti; the photographs of abandoned, struggling humanity and swamped infrastructure in New Orleans in 2005 show the devastation of Hurricane Katrina; the charred bodies of four American contractors strung from a bridge in Fallujah photographed in 2004 are shocking, as are the photographs of the brutal murder in 1990 of an Inkatha man by supporters of South Africa's African National Congress during the conflict between black groups in South Africa's transition to democracy. Such photographs are more powerful than any text. According to critic Susie Linfield, it is the camera that has done so much to provoke our consciences. As she says, 'Today it is, quite simply, impossible to say "I did not know"; photographs have robbed us of the alibi of ignorance' (Linfield 2010: 46).

While the important communicative function of photographs is to tell a story, to communicate meaning, pictures communicate different things to different people. The way we look at and interpret photographs is shaped by our learned experiences, the life we have lead, the things we have studied. We do not have to know all the details of a photograph – who took it and why, where it was taken and why, how it was taken – for each of us to instantly build a story around it. A graphic photograph prompts the imagination to create a narrative, and the more explicit the image, the more detailed the imagined narrative. As ethicist Louis Hodges says,

Though their messages overlap, pictures and words communicate different things. In conveying feeling and eliciting emotions, pictures are usually superior to words. Pictures are integral to the larger journalistic function of telling people about their world...their important communicative function is to tell a story, to communicate meaning. (Hodges 2010: 251).

Photographer Ken Jarecke jarred public sensibilities when he captured one of the most compelling photographs to come out of the Gulf War in 1991 – the charred remains of an incinerated Iraqi soldier emerging from his armoured vehicle. Although photo agencies and news publications were reluctant to publish the photograph at the time, Jarecke’s photograph is now widely acclaimed as an important visual narrative of the aftermath of warfare. When asked about the appropriateness of the photograph, Jarecke said, ‘How could I *not* take the picture? If I don’t make pictures like this, people like my mother will think what they see in war is what they see in movies’ (Jarecke 2005: May 9).



Ken Jarecke’s depiction of the aftermath of war, 1991

So photographs are an important part of the visual currency of our time. We take them, carry them around with us and look at them endlessly. As historian Grahame Clarke says, the commonplace status of a photograph belies its underlying complexity (Clarke 1997: 19). Any photograph is dependent on a series of historical, cultural, social and technical contexts that establish its meaning. Photographs are invested with a structure of codes and conventions that open a doorway on the world – the photograph ‘speaks very much to a sense of power in the way we seek to order and construct the world around us’, according to Clarke (Clarke 1997: 11). Photography retrains and upgrades our powers of observation. As Susan Sontag notes, no-one would dispute that photography gave a tremendous boost to the cognitive claims of sight, because it so greatly enlarged the realm of the visible (Sontag 1997: 57). Embedded in photography is the power of what has been seen and captured, and the way that distance in time and cultural distance from the photograph increase our interest. Picture-taking is interpreted as either a lucid and precise act of knowing, of conscious intelligence, or as a pre-intellectual, intuitive encounter. As ethnographer Karin Becker notes, the photo-eye is revelatory, dragging facts, however distasteful or deleterious to those in power, into the light of day (Becker 2003: 19).

Memory freeze-frames, says Sontag. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for

memorising it. As she states, ‘Photographs that everyone recognises are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about’ (Sontag 2002: 85).

In the long run, photography enters the collective consciousness, and more importantly, the collective conscience. As James Nachtwey maintains, photography has become an archive of visual memory, so that we learn from the past and apply its lessons to the future. Much documentary photography presents a moral and radical vocabulary that speaks to a public conscience that can discern the moral implications recorded therein. According to Nachtwey,

Photography maintains a unique ability to grasp a moment out of the chaos of history and to preserve it and hold it up to the light. It puts a human face on events that might otherwise become clouded in political abstractions and statistics. It gives a voice to people who otherwise would not have one (Chalifour 2004: May/June).

The aim common to documentary photographers is to communicate the reality of what they see – and it is human history, not aesthetics, that test their photographs, photographs that are a catalyst for discussion about what happens in other parts of the world (Wald 1991: June 9). Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado echoes James Nachtwey in his belief that everything that happens in the world must be shown. Also like Nachtwey, Salgado’s brutally frank photographs of human pain have no relation to the tourism of poverty. Writer Eduardo Galeano observes that Salgado’s images do not violate but penetrate the human spirit in order to reveal it. They are not a macabre, obscene exhibitionism of suffering but rather a poetry of horror because there is a sense of honour in their essence (Galeano 1990: 8).



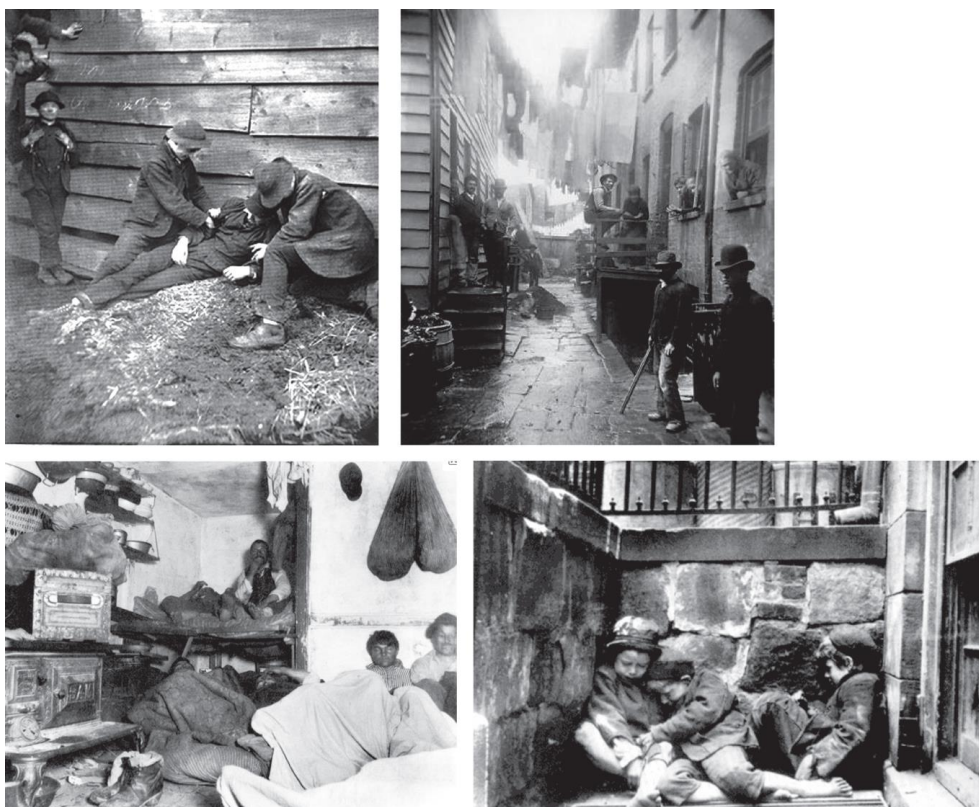
Photographs that shocked the world and helped turn American public opinion against the Vietnam War: Eddie Adams’ photograph of the summary execution of a Viet Cong officer, 1968; Ron Haeberle documented the massacre of unarmed My Lai villagers by American troops, 1968.

In no other form of society in history has there been such a density of visual messages that serve as catalysts for emotional responses as in recent times. Photographs that everyone recognises – such as Nick Ut’s photograph of napalmed children in the Vietnam War, Tom Stoddart’s photograph of a starving Dinka mother and her children in Sudan, Ron Haeberle’s photographs of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, Eddie Adams’ image of the summary execution of a Viet Cong officer, Richard Drew’s falling man on September 11, Kevin Carter’s photograph of a starving Sudanese toddler stalked by a vulture – are recognised and identified as part of

society's collective memory of events. As writer Daniel Okrent says, 'Stories may whisper with nuance and headlines declaim in summary, but pictures capture attention, and if they're good, they don't let go' (Okren 2005: January 9).

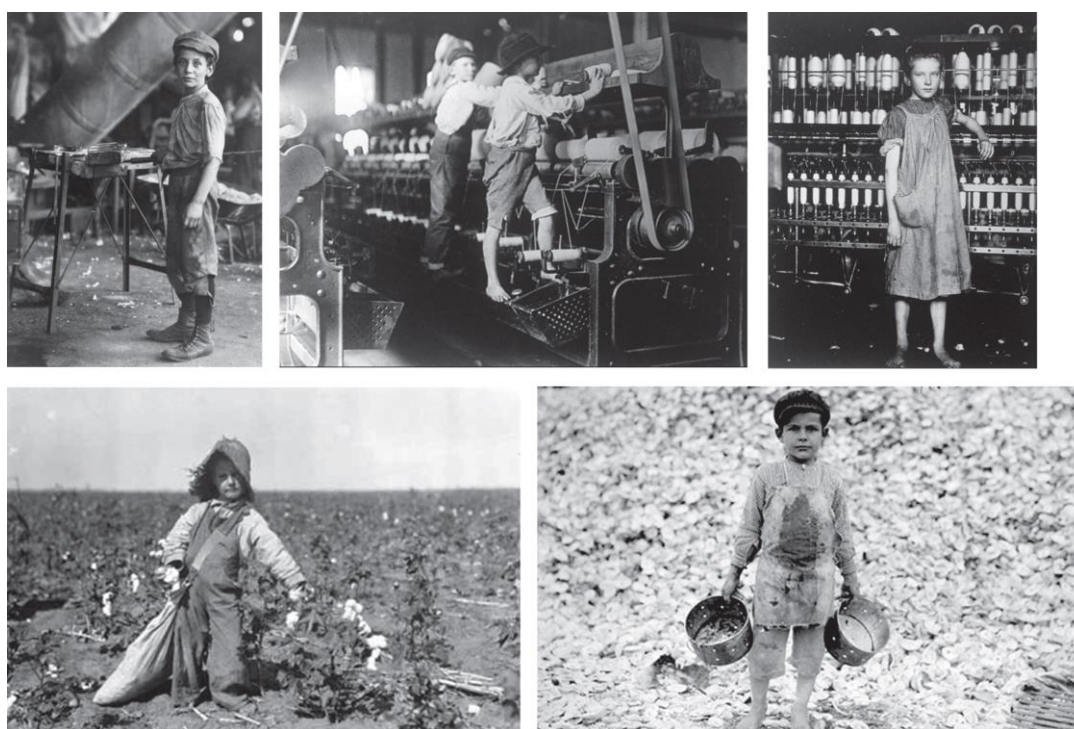
The best documentary photographs, some dating from the mid-1860s, succeed because they relate to the desires of their audience for information – far from being passive observers of the contemporary scene, they are perceived as a mirror to past events. As arts writer and researcher Derrick Price says, documentary photography does, as the name indicates, have a special relationship to other texts and is seen, in the classic form, as a way of narrating current events or illustrating written news stories (Price 2004: 70). Jacob Riis, a police reporter for *The New York Tribune*, photographs the notorious Lower East Side slums of New York to draw attention to the appalling living conditions. To Riis, the dramatic narrative is the goal.

Lewis Hine, a sociologist employed by the National Child Labor Committee in 1908, is one of the inheritors of Riis's reform mantle. But Hine extends Riis's work outside the urban framework. He employs photography for the cause of social reform – he follows the tendrils of poverty and social dysfunction back along economic, social, class and geographical lines, and outward to their consequences, declaring that he wants to show the thing that had to be corrected (Brooks 2004: 106).



When the means justifies the end: Jacob Riis staged photographs to suit his story-telling purposes. Three of his best known are (clockwise from top left), *A Growler Gang in Session (robbing a lush) 1887*; *Bandits' Roost 1888*, and *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters 1880*. His famous photograph (bottom left), *Five Cents A Night Bayard Street 1889* was an invasion of the privacy of homeless single men forced to sleep in cramped, poor accommodation.

Recognising the implicit power of photography as evidence and persuasion, Hine's child labourers, often dwarfed by their surroundings in mine, mill, factory, and from penurious families, stand squarely in the middle of the frame, looking directly at the photographer. These uncompromising photographs create a cumulative, convincing story of the exploitation of children. Photography historian and theorist Alan Sekula says that any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation thus elevating the photograph to the 'legal' status of document, that every photographic image is a sign of someone's investment in sending a message (Sekula 1982: 87).



Lewis Hine's series of photographs of child labour showed the exploitations of children, some as young as five, as in the little shrimp picker, Mississippi (bottom row right). Others, top row: a young boy on a night shift in a glass factory 1908; children in a Georgia cotton mill 1909; a young spinner in a New England mill 1913; and (bottom left) a child cotton picker 1913.

The power of the image to stand as evidence has never been more dramatically invoked than on the battlefield. The earliest war photographer, the British surgeon John McCosh, took photographs of his fellow officers, artillery pieces and soldiers at the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49) against the British in India and the Second Burma War (1852-53). Roger Fenton's photographic storytelling was recognised by British publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons who, with the approval of the Government, commissioned Fenton to take photographs at the Crimean War (1853-56). As Martin Sandler says, these were reproduced and sold to the soldiers and their families as well as the public (Sandler 2002: 105).

From the time photographs are available to the public gaze in exhibitions, on postcards or in the new illustrated news publications, there is discussion about what is in the public interest. New demands are made on reality in the era of cameras. In its October 1862 report on an exhibition of American Civil War Photographs by Mathew

Brady, the *New York Times* comments that the images of the dead brought home ‘the terrible reality’ of war with their ‘terrible distinctness’ (The New York Times 1862: October 20). The poignancy of the comment points to similar occasions 142 years later following the devastation of the 2004 Indian Ocean Boxing Day tsunami. The photographs taken by Gardner and O’Sullivan have an impact even today because the dead lie on their backs, with the faces of some clearly visible – as Sontag says, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked faces of the dead (Sontag 2003: 70). Since Brady’s time, no war or violent conflict has lacked its photographic record and interpreters.

Conclusion

Destined by its technology to represent a specific moment in the past, photography is representative of a relation between then and now. Images become history when they are used to interpret the present in light of the past, when they are presented and received as explanatory accounts of a collective reality, as Trachtenberg says (Trachtenberg 1989: 6). Photography’s perceived objectivity as graphic storyteller recommends it to an empirical age. Given that photography was initially seen as a creative form, it’s not surprising that many pioneering documentary photographers appreciated how photography extended the notion of visual information. But can photographs illuminate the dark? This paper maintains they can. Visual storytelling replaces rhetoric, dogma, statistics and political abstraction with understanding on a human level. Photographs tell stories that hold the powerful to account and give a voice to people who otherwise do not have a voice. Sontag describes photographs as a means of participating in another person’s mortality, vulnerability, mutability (Sontag 1997: 15). And as Berger points out, every image embodies a way of seeing (Berger 1997: 182).

Of course, the importance of photography lies not only in that which is presented but that which also concerns the invisible, the stories that appear just outside the frame. And so photography is a trigger to ‘telling’, to making sense of and remembering experiences past and present. As Sontag notes,

The force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits... potent means for turning the tables on reality, for turning it into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed (Sontag 1978: 189).

They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Photographic images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as a piece of it, she says (Sontag 1978: 3). A photograph may be described as a means of testing, confirming and constructing a view of reality (Berger 1997: 182). It may be seen as visual anthropology and the photographer something of an ethnographer, according to Julianne Newton, someone who gathers and records information about human societies and culture. Photographers record and analyse, ‘they immerse themselves in the culture of the observed... they reflect on the meaning of what they have seen’ (Newton 2001: 54). They are telling stories.

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