

..... "The contemplation of things as they are,
without substitution or imposture,
without error or confusion,
is in itself a nobler thing than
a whole harvest of invention."

(Dorothea Lange posted these words,
attributed to Francis Bacon, on her darkroom door.)

Documentary Photography Today

BY JURGEN SCHADEBERG

Documentary photography records the life, condition and behaviour of human beings, the social scenes of today to mirror the present and record relationships between people and relationships between social groups, lifestyles, working conditions and social behaviour. It also records the achievements in industries, science and arts... In other words, it is the Pulse of the Day, the "Zeitgeist"!

Documentary photography includes all subjects, from wedding pictures in photo albums to landscapes or wildlife photography, especially if the photographs have magic.

The world around us is continuously vanishing and as it vanishes, there is no way we can bring it back. Photography must hold on to the changing elements around us — a memory cannot be developed and printed whereas the painter, the writer, the film maker has time to reflect on the subject. The film maker, for example, can recreate the past with historical photographs.

The photojournalist, the documentary photographer, has a responsibility to record people, places and events in the most truthful manner possible and as humanly as possible, without distorting or romanticising, without adding or subtracting.

He must look at his assignment and examine it, and search for the often intangible truth. He must go beyond the editor's brief which is often short-sighted or distorted. The editor, sitting behind his desk, comes up with briefs and ideas which often do not relate to the realities out there when the photographer is in the field.

These thoughts are the ideals of Documentary Photography.

There are problems, however, that have appeared in the past three decades.

A historian once complained to me in the early seventies that it had become more

and more difficult to find images after the mid seventies of, for example, street life, village and farm life, community and family life, and people at work.

Somehow, with the closing of many of the major magazines in the United States such as *Life* and *Look*, as well as *Picture Post* in England, photographers stopped photographing life and rather worked for new magazines and agencies which covered news, wars, violence, the unusual and the exceptional.

The photographer who captures the most gruesome pictures of death and destruction achieves instant success. The images included in specialist magazines which cover such topics such as boating, cars, cooking, women's issues, sex and handicrafts, may well be of interest to future generations. However, they do not show the life or the "Zeitgeist" of our society.

Photographers used to walk the street looking at city life, attend festivals and traditional festivities and might go from an event such as a German Beer fest to a Spanish religious Easter Parade. We used to go to weddings and discotheques; we photographed the poor and the rich; we went to mental hospitals and prisons, garden parties and bingo halls, farmyards and factories, old age homes and nurseries.

Today I wonder whether we are still looking at ourselves or whether we are seduced by the superficial instant "fix" attitude that needs to look for the fancy, the unusual, the shocking, the lollipop, the violent. Are we ignoring reality as it doesn't sell?

Where are the images of life in our cities today — the squatter camps, the townships, the holiday camps, the religious festivals and community life?

South Africa is going through a process of rapid change and we need to record these changes.

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