

HONR 398-701

12 December 2011

The Ethics of Observation:

If You Can't Stop the Horror, Shouldn't You At Least Document it?

From the bathroom doorway of a New Jersey mansion, Donna Ferrato took a photograph. Adjacent, wall-length mirrors reveal the image's subjects—Lisa and Garth—reflected from three different angles. Garth's hand is a blur. Lisa backs up against the counter, arms drawn to her face in a futile attempt to deflect the blow. Upon closer examination, the photo reveals a third character. Reflected in the corner of one of the mirrors is Ferrato's own crouching figure, black camera held to her face, right eye looking through the shutter. Click.

Over the course of the semester, we have studied documentarians who have sought to give hidden injustices a face. Jacob Riis documented ramshackle tenements to draw attention to poverty in New York City. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans humanized the consequences of the Great Depression with their work for the Farm Security Administration. Susan Meiselas traveled to Nicaragua to document civil war and based her work abroad on a concern about human rights violations. Sebastião Salgado photographed the drought stricken Sahel region of Africa where approximately one million people died from extreme malnutrition and related causes.

In pursuing such projects, documentarians bear witness to varying extremes of human tragedy. As we surveyed such work in class, many of us were struck by the images of violence and dejection. We found ourselves asking when, if ever, a documentarian might have a duty to lay down his or her camera. In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar poses this same question.

“In the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake... do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape-recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can’t stop the horror, shouldn’t you at least document it?” (2).

Behar notes the oxymoronic nature of the term “participant observer.” The concept, she writes, is “split at the root: act as a participant, but don’t forget to keep your eyes down” (5). What, then, should documentarians do when they feel compelled to right a wrong? When they are shocked and appalled at events unfolding before their eyes? Should they observe, or should they act?

This paper aims to demonstrate that observation and action need not be deemed mutually exclusive. Indeed, in the case of most social photography, observation *is* action. As documentarians keep the camera rolling, they do so for the sake of justice. Documentarians seem to view representation of particular scenes as a means by which to address problems that are universal. One cannot fight the invisible. In maintaining physical distance from their subjects (sacrificing the particular), documentarians are able to give broader problems a face and foster in others a desire to seek change (targeting the universal).

In seeking to prove that observation *is* action, this paper will focus on two documentarians: Hugh O’Conner and Donna Ferrato. Part I will describe the sentiments which led to O’Conner’s death in 1967. These sentiments attest to the transformative power of photography. Part II will then describe Donna Ferrato’s struggle in the 1980s to change how domestic violence was viewed in America. This second part will focus on how Ferrato views her own work and why, when witnessing violence, she chooses *not* to put down her camera. The conclusion will briefly

consider a criticism that many social photographers face—namely, the charge that they aesthesize violence. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate that interpretive documentation is a meaningful form of action.

I. The Power of the Camera

In 1967, at the height of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Canadian filmmaker Hugh O'Conner documented a tenant living in one of Hobart Ison's rental houses in Letcher County Kentucky. Just as the crew had finished filming, Ison shot and killed O'Conner with his gun. Tom Rankin provides insight into the event, recounting the reactions of several local citizens. The locals explain that Ison had apparently been offended by yet another filmmaker "mining" the desperate image of his home region. Ison's attorney simply said that Ison believed the filmmakers were setting up a "circumstance of ridicule" (qtd. in Rankin 133).

Hugh O'Conner had worked for the National Film Board of Canada and had been commissioned to document Appalachian poverty in an attempt to expose injustices. The film crew's aims, however, were not well received by all local residents. Many resented the intrusion of outsiders, certain and angered that they were being presented to the world in a negative light.

In *A Discussion of Stranger with a Camera*, Diane Price compiles a review of Elizabeth Barret's film, a documentary which revisits Letcher Country years after the shooting. Various participants share their own reactions to both the historical shooting and Barret's film. Donovan Cain is the grandson and great-grandson of coal miners. He paints a dramatic image, explaining that "the camera, when randomly flashed in the strip-mine scare mountains of my old Kentucky home, to this very day can induce its own post-traumatic stress effect, reminding folks of our own war, waged with the flash of a camera rather than a gun" (Rankin 416). "People in Kentucky and the Central Appalachian coal fields," Cain says, "may know the power of the

camera better than anyone else. They've seen it help, and they've watched it destroy" (Rankin 416). Had Ison—like many others in the region—not been wholeheartedly convinced of the power of the camera, Hugh O'Conner would likely still be alive.

Though she does not refer directly to O'Conner's case, Susan Meiselas makes an observation that directly relates to the fear felt by Letcher County residents. A witness, she says, is not just someone who sees photographs as evidence. The other side of "witness" is that we *do* intervene. We intervene, she says, by the fact of our presence in a particular place. "We change how people see themselves sometimes," Meiselas believes, as well as "how others may come to see them" (107). Ison clearly did not like how he thought others would come to see him. He knew that O'Conner's observation was, in effect, action that he believed would come to harm him—action that, in his mind, justified a violent response.

II. A Documentarian's Job

Hugh O'Conner's murder proves that the human subjects of documentation certainly believe that documentation can have powerful effects, and a look at Donna Ferrato's philosophy helps to demonstrate that documentarians similarly view their work as capable of affecting change.

Ferrato spent the 1980s living with victims of domestic violence and their abusers, staying in battered women's shelters and accompanying police officers rushing to domestic conflicts. She stumbled upon this subject matter unexpectedly. Reporter James Estrin explains that Ferrato, while following the story of sexual adventurers, stood stunned in the bathroom doorway while a man screamed at his wife. As he pulled back his right arm, Ferrato raised her camera and took a picture. As the man slapped his wife in the face, Estrin writes, Ferrato closed her eyes—and took another frame.

Ferrato's work has fought against the problem of domestic abuse. Her photography has helped to change laws and establish and finance domestic women's shelters across the country. "I want to start a revolution with my pictures," Ferrato said; "I want to wake people up, make people feel things" (qtd. in Estrin). Her approach has been to put a face on the once taboo topic of domestic abuse. In creating awareness, Ferrato opens up channels of discourse by means of which the public can begin to confront the issue.

While Ferrato's work has helped to bring about positive change, one cannot help but question Ferrato's ethical sense of duty. Many of her photographs are graphic and startling. In a FotoEvidence interview, Ferrato is asked whether—as she she witnessed men beating women—she was ever divide between taking the picture and defending the victim. Ferrato admits that the first time she saw a man beat a woman, she stopped him from hitting her more than once but got the picture first. "Yes," she says, "I am divided between whether to take picture or defend the victim, but my instinct is to document the moment." She explains further, "If I chose to put down my camera and stop one man from hitting one woman I'll be helping just one woman. However, if I get the picture I can help countless more." This assertion seems to encapsulate the motivation of most social photographers. "By taking the picture," Ferrato finishes, "I am defending the truth" (Interview). It seems that Ferrato is able to watch and document particular instances of abuse because she believes that, in doing so, she is helping to fight domestic abuse as a universal issue.

III. Conclusion

Because social photographers strive to document particular instances in order to foster emotional responses to larger issues, they aim to capture scenes and events in ways which are striking. Consequently, photographers who focus on violent or tragic subjects often come under

fire for their creative approaches to aesthetic representation. People, for example, have criticized Susan Meiselas for her use of color in her Nicaragua photographs. They find the use of color inappropriate and feel that she is aesthesizing violence in Central America. Similarly, critics have commented on the beauty of Sebastião Salgado's work. Is it appropriate, they wonder, to document human suffering in ways that are, for lack of a better description, visually appealing?

Meiselas counters that she was simply looking at the world in which she found herself. She writes that she was "trying to figure out the appropriate translation to capture what I felt about that place at that moment" (Meiselas 105). It is important to note that social documentarians deeply value authenticity in this way. They do more than just let a camera roll. Their observation becomes *action* as soon as they commit to capturing how they themselves feel in each moment. This emotion, this creative element of interpretation, lends their work power. By uniquely capturing particular moments, documentarians actively defend, as Ferrato would say, universal "truths."

Works Cited

- Behar, Ruth. "The Vulnerable Observer." *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996. 2-9.
- Estrin, James. "Helping the People Beyond the Pain." *New York Times Photojournalism – Photography, Video and Visual Journalism Archives - Lens Blog - NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 9 Nov. 2011. Web. 10 Dec. 2011.
- "Interview: Donna Ferrato | FotoEvidence." *FotoEvidence | DOCUMENTING SOCIAL INJUSTICE*. Web. 16 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.fotoevidence.com/interview-donna-ferrato>>.
- Meiselas, Susan. "Central America and Human Rights." *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*. 2nd ed. Washington: Smithsonian, 2010. 99-107.
- Price, Diane, et al. "A Camera is a Gun: A Discussion of *Stranger with a Camera*." *Appalachian Journal*
- Rankin, Tom. Rev. of *Stranger with a Camera*. Dir. Elizabeth Barret. *The Oral History Review*. 30.2 (Summer/Autumn 2003): 133-135. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 November 2011.