

**Documentary  
Expression and  
Thirties America**

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CHAPTER 3

The Two  
Persuasions

Social documentary deals with facts that are alterable. It has an intellectual dimension to make clear what the facts are, why they came about, and how they can be changed for the better. Its more important dimension, however, is usually the emotional: feeling the fact may move the audience to wish to change it. "You can right a lot of wrongs with 'pitiless publicity,'" Franklin Roosevelt said, and he advocated such "publicity" (though he avoided its tainted name "propaganda") because he knew that social change "is a difficult thing in our civilization unless you have sentiment."<sup>1</sup>

To right wrongs, to promote social action, documentary tries to influence its audience's intellect and feelings. It persuades in either or both of two ways, directly and by example.

Direct

The direct method, the more usual, puts the facts before the audience as irrefutably as possible and solicits a commitment to change them. A 1972 magazine advertisement for the Save the Children Federation has a blurred photograph of the face of a

Korean boy, his brow furrowed, eyes fearful, and mouth tight. The ad says: "You Can Help Save Bo Suk for \$15.00 a Month. Or You Can Turn the Page." In Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, a classic of the direct method, the audience sees an evil, a preventable suffering, and sees it, unprevented, kill. The girl is dead, the narrator says in passing; yet even as he says it, there she is, throbbing with pain and life on the screen. And one feels somehow accomplice to her fate, as though sitting in a theater watching her were part of the social passivity that killed her. The viewer feels an impulse toward the screen, almost as though he would halt the image, hold it there, and correct the narrator, saying, "No, no, you see? She's alive."° One feels this even seeing the film today, forty years after it was made. One probably doesn't feel responsible for her death: she died long ago. But one feels implicated. The casual dying of a child, when it happens as close to us as film can make it happen, with none of the consolations of fiction, not even sentiment, is an extreme violation of what we feel to be natural and right.°° However briefly, it calls us into question—our world, our humanity, our living, our death. We want the girl alive in part, then, to protect ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

To make us feel implicated is the purpose of the direct method. The facts are given us: how do we feel about them? what are we going to do about them? If we feel nothing and will do nothing, the documentary has failed of its aim. Shortly before Pearl Harbor, Archibald MacLeish praised Edward Murrow for

° Thornton Wilder creates the same effect in *Our Town* (1938) when the narrator remarks off-handedly on the deaths of people the audience sees in the fullness of life. Like Emily in the last act of the play, the spectator wants to cry out and keep them as they are, make them realize how precious their living is.

°° Children figure so often in propaganda because they are par excellence the blameless victims of social circumstance. In 1931 the American Red Cross refused to feed striking West Virginia miners and their families, explaining that their suffering was not an act of God; Heywood Brown, who supported the strike, said that even were the miners in the wrong, "is that sufficient reason for allowing their children, the innocent victims of these prolonged bickerings, to go hungry?"

his broadcasts from London during the Blitz. In two sentences MacLeish caught just what made these broadcasts such trenchant documentary; he said to Murrow, "You burned the city of London in our homes and we felt the flames that burned it. You laid the dead of London at our doors and we knew the dead were our dead." This is what documentary must do if it is to work social change: talk to us, and convince us that we, our deepest interests, are engaged.

Thirties documentary constantly addresses "you," the "you" who is we the audience, and exhorts, wheedles, begs us to identify, pity, participate. Richard Wright, in his documentary book *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), implores the white reader, "Look at us [the black Americans], and know us and you will know yourselves, for *we* are *you*, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!" Dorothy Parker, an eyewitness to the Spanish Civil War, explained the people of Madrid to her readers; she said that even after the rebels' bombardment of the city,

there are still nearly a million people here. Some of them—you may be like that yourself—won't leave their homes and possessions, all the things they have gathered together through the years. They are not at all dramatic about it. . . . They want the same thing you have—they want to live in a democracy. And they will fight for it.

resolutely, as no doubt "you" would. At the end of the important documentary film *The City* (1939), Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner intercut shots contrasting big-city filth and confusion with the tidy calm of a Greenbelt town; the narrator intoned: "You take your choice. . . . You and your children, the choice is yours." In his social-conscious phase, Ernest Hemingway wrote for *New Masses* a curious piece of propaganda and self-exposure, a "First-Hand Report on the Florida Hurricane" of 1935 that killed 450 World War I veterans working on a WPA highway in the Keys. The heart of this outraged, prurient report is a strange conversation between "you" and "I" while hunting corpses in a mangrove swamp:

Hey, there's another one. He's got low shoes, put him down, man. . . . Turn him over. Face tumefied beyond recognition. Hell, he don't look like a veteran. He's too old. He's got grey hair. You'll have grey hair yourself this time next week. And across his back there was a great big blister as wide as his back and all ready to burst. . . . Sure he's a veteran. I know him. What's he got low shoes on for then? Maybe he made some money shooting craps and bought them. You don't know that guy. You can't tell him now. I know him, he hasn't got any thumb. That's how I know him. The land crabs ate his thumb. You think you know everybody. Well you waited a long time to get sick brother. Sixty-seven of them and you get sick at the sixty-eighth.

Not content with making "you," the spectator, turn gray and vomit, Hemingway at the end of the article has you die as the veterans did: "The high wall of water rolls you over and over and then, whatever it is, you get it and we find you, now of no importance, stinking in the mangroves. You're dead now, brother." But presumably if you had survived the experience, this imagined death, as Hemingway did, you would try to do what he was trying to do with his article: bring to justice those "who left you there in the hurricane months on the Keys."<sup>3</sup>

The direct method strives to give the audience the experience—and this as forcefully as possible. "A good documentary," said Roy Stryker, "should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person *looks* like, but it must also tell the audience what it would *feel* like to be an actual witness to the scene." Stryker was referring to documentary photographs, and the still- or motion-picture or TV camera provides the ideal instrument for the direct method. John Huston once remarked that "on paper all you can do is to say something happened, and if you say it well enough the reader believes you. In pictures, if you do it right, *the* thing happens right there on the screen." The spectator sees it happen, firsthand. As Arthur Rothstein observed, "The lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print." The two being interchangeable, the person looking at the print is, in effect, present when the shutter snapped. He meets the subject as

Lange and Taylor wished "you" to meet the people in *An American Exodus*: "face to face."<sup>4</sup>

It is no wonder then that a photograph has, in Beaumont Newhall's words, "special value as evidence or proof." We believe it because we believe our eyes. A historian of photography, Newhall agrees that a photographer who uses a documentary strategy "seeks to do more than convey information. . . . His aim is to persuade and convince." The first documentary photos in America were made, Newhall says, in the 1870s of the geysers at Yellowstone by W. H. Jackson.<sup>5</sup> Jackson's pictures gave such convincing evidence of natural wonders formerly thought the tall tales of travelers that Congress declared the Yellowstone region a national park. Helmut and Alison Gernsheim have argued that the "first photographic social documentation" occurred in John Thompson's pictures for *Street Life in London*, an 1877 book portraying London's poor. But most historians agree with Michel Braive that "socially committed photography" began in the United States with Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. Their work—Riis in the 1880s and 1890s, Hine in the first decades of this century—is well known. What has not been properly emphasized, however, is that in order to effect social reform, both *became* photographers. Riis was a police reporter, and Hine a sociologist; each taught himself to take pictures because he believed the camera would be a mightier weapon than the pen against poverty. Word-men both, they nonetheless felt images more telling than words. Said Hine with typical plainness, "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera."<sup>5</sup>

Riis and Hine were a generation ahead of time. Despite their example, the most influential journalism of the Progressive era, the work of the Muckrakers, relied on the written word. The Progressives were, as Warren Susman says, people of the book. People in the 1930s—"people of the picture and the radio," Susman

<sup>4</sup> The Civil War photographs of Brady and O'Sullivan? Few historians call them documentary, though they are. They are human documents, however; they had no propagandistic use.

calls them—approached experience more as Riis and Hine did, and as we do now. In 1970, when *Life* magazine accused the Veterans' Administration hospitals of failing to provide decent care for American soldiers wounded in Vietnam, it didn't argue its case primarily on its reporters' accounts nor on the shocking statistics that "a Senate subcommittee chaired by California's Alan Cranston has documented." Instead, it presented photographs of rats captured in a hospital ward; of a man paralyzed from the neck down, sitting naked and unattended after his shower; of paraplegics changing the sheets of those unable to move their arms. Similarly, in 1930, the reporter who broke the story of slave labor on the Southern chain gangs, John Spivak, even while reading the Georgia State Prison records that laid the dreadful facts bare, "knew there were two things I had to do—get photographs of [the records] and visit the prison camps. America would not believe what I would say unless I could prove it with visual evidence." The truth would be vitiated, deniable, unless he could present it to his audience, via photographs, as it came to him: present it directly.<sup>6</sup>

The truth Spivak brought America, the truth *Life* brought, the truths Riis and Hine brought, were all new and repellent. To convince people of what they don't wish to be true demands the strongest documentation. If only seeing will make them believe, they must be given a picture. Exposé documentation relies so often on photographs and films not, as the historian Leo Gurko suggests, because a single picture communicates what formerly required a whole essay: one photo is not worth a thousand words if the words are doing their proper job. Rather, exposé uses the evidence of cameras—and more recently, of tape recorders—because machines communicate facts passively, transparently, with an almost pure impersonality. Hine and Lange both felt the camera "a powerful tool for research." And so it is, because it is a *tool*. It mechanically re-creates reality, as writing or painting—crafts, not tools—never can.<sup>7</sup>

"With a camera," explained Margaret Bourke-White, "the shut-

ter opens and closes and the only rays that come in to be registered come directly from the object in front." Writing is not so direct, so mechanical: as Bourke-White said, "Whatever facts a person writes have to be colored by his prejudice and bias." Actually, there is bias in most photographs, especially documentary photographs, and Bourke-White's among them. She exaggerated the impersonality of the medium; because the process that makes a photo is mechanical, she claimed that the results are wholly objective, an error common in the thirties.<sup>8</sup> Still, she was correct about writing: it is more obviously prejudiced. A photograph is made from ingredients in the world; writing is made of words. Actuality vouches for part of any photo; one may have what a writer says just on his say-so. And his word, or his words, may not be sufficiently impartial.<sup>8</sup>

In 1931 Edmund Wilson reported a congressional hearing on communist activities in the U.S. He described the participants in vigorous detail. The only anti-communist witness before the committee was, he wrote, "one of the most untrustworthy-looking characters who have surely ever been called upon to testify—a pale-eyed, shifty-eyed, shaved-headed man, represented as an honest Russian farmer sent to prison for criticizing the Soviets." In the fifties Wilson republished his thirties reportage, much revised; the "Marxist morals" he had drawn too eagerly from the phenomena he went out to explore he now toned down or expunged. But he let stand his description of the farmer, appending to it an apologetic footnote:

This represents a kind of thing that is to be sedulously avoided by honest reporters. On the strength of a physical impression and solely out of a sympathy toward the Soviet Union, about which at first hand I knew nothing, I assumed that this man was lying. . . . I leave my report of the incident as an example of the capacity of partisanship to fabricate favorable evidence.

<sup>8</sup> Laurence Stallings dedicated his picture book *The First World War*, a best seller of 1933, to "The Camera Eye," the time's equivalent of ideal truth.

A camera, however partisan, would not have been able to fabricate so completely. It would have showed the farmer in the flesh, and, as George Orwell observed in 1938, "when you meet anyone in the flesh you realise immediately that he is a human being and not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas." A camera would at least have showed the farmer to be a man, not a perambulating deceit.<sup>9</sup>