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The Documentary Moment and the Revelation at Hand

by Tom Rankin

FOR MANY YEARS I've forbidden students in my photography courses from coming to class and talking about an image they saw but didn't take. In a class built around the making of pictures, I insist we take and look at *actual* photographs, not photographs that could have been. "I saw the most amazing photograph just this morning," the story can start. "I was walking and the light was just perfect and then there was this broken-down car, the driver with his head under the hood, somebody sitting in the back seat, and just then a hawk flew low, appearing to be curious . . ." and so on it might go. It was seemingly a moment of clarity and magic and unique confluence, all *witnessed*, but there is no image to share with the other photographers or filmmakers in the class, not to mention an audience beyond. The photographs not taken are as legion as the stories heard but never recorded. Like the field note never registered on paper, what remains is the memory, born of that instantaneous thing—the moment. The documentary artist attempts, however imperfectly, to *do* something about what they witness, how they feel, what they are compelled to say. That doing and making becomes, in turn, an extension of the initial instant—and of the memory—an effort, as Eudora Welty wrote, "imprisons a moment in time."¹

In this issue, we explore those instants, memories, and responses, the moments of impulse to document, comment, engage, act, and intervene. The documentary moment certainly includes photography's long recognized ability to create the illusion of time standing still, fixed

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and frozen in an intentional but arbitrary frame. Henri Cartier-Bresson drew the title to his canonical book *The Decisive Moment*, from Cardinal de Retz, whom he quotes in the introduction: “There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment.” Cartier-Bresson continued to articulate ideas about seeing and capturing these fluid moments: “Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant.” The “fixing” is what so many hope to do, wrestling with the passage of time, resisting the erasure of what actually happened.²

We also know “the moment” to mean the time we live in, the urgency we feel to respond to the ever-changing waters we find ourselves floating in—political, emotional, environmental—and to do it in order to amplify what we see, hear, and believe, to share it with others in hopes of revealing our own awakening to a broader audience. We live now, one might argue, in a constantly documented moment, with most of our public spaces under surveillance, with social media capturing and disseminating the mundane, exotic, and frightening at a pace impossible to fathom much less consume.

In 1942, Roy Stryker, director of the New Deal-era Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s and ’40s, put forth his idea of documentary in an essay for *The Complete Photographer*: “Documentary is an approach, not a technique; an affirmation, not a negation . . . Every phase of our time and our surroundings has a vital significance and any camera in good repair is an adequate instrument. The job is to know enough about the subject matter to find its significance in itself and in its relation to its surroundings, its time, and its function.” Stryker’s assertion of documentary as an “affirmation” is more complex than it initially appears. He doesn’t mean that documentary is never critical or shouldn’t drive toward change and reform, but rather that in documenting “our time and our surroundings,” documentary artists not only affirm through the act of witnessing but also affirm the valued role of engagement. Documentarians participate, intervene, and act in the communities, struggles, and stories that they record.³



THIS PAST AUGUST I was sitting with friends at the Wooden Nickel Pub in Hillsborough, North Carolina, on a late Sunday afternoon while we reflected on the power of an event we’d just come from, celebrating the best of our community. Off the street, someone came into the Nickel and said a group of κκκ members were gathering on the Orange County Courthouse steps, just over a block away. I immediately went in that direction, to witness and to photograph, to confront and to counter. I found some of the Klan members dressed in their regalia of sheets and hoods, others sporting all-too-common Confederate and white supremacist



symbols on T-shirts and hats. Within minutes, it seemed, word had spread through the community and there was a healthy counterprotest that grew steadily larger, with many local residents coming to challenge the hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism in clear and dramatic view.

Why the impulse to photograph such a moment? I've heard for years the advice that we should pay these kinds of people no attention and that will make them go away, that they are fringe crazies and that eventually the old generation will die out and times will be better. Yet how can we ignore a moment like this, a demonstration of hate on the steps of the county courthouse, a diabolical intervention into the quiet of a town? I asked if it was all right to photograph because I try to ask whenever possible. Since then, I've thought that my request for permission may well have been disingenuous since I would've photographed regardless of the answer. My confidence to walk up and begin photographing in a situation like this comes in part from my privilege of being white, of having local knowledge of that space, appearing to be a typical weathered photojournalist, and my experience of being in so many situations with my camera through the years. I also was fueled by anger, a defiant sense that this group of hooded racists had no right to occupy the front steps of the courthouse without confrontation. I moved closer, drawn by the sheer ugliness of the reality and a desire to see if getting closer helped to see through such darkness. I was doing what I typically do when I'm drawn by what I see—I photographed. Soon, a diverse crowd of local citizens gathered in a counterdemonstra-

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tion, many also documenting with cell phones.

We so often document out of intuition, propelled perhaps by the heart as much as the head. I knew as I was taking these photographs that I had no specific plans for the film I was exposing, but doing nothing or looking away didn't seem an option. I wanted to get close, to witness, and to ask questions. I photographed what my mind now reads as a father and son, the two standing side by side, one fully attired in his Klan outfit, the younger boy in a White Knights T-shirt. I think it was the space between us—the actual physical space but also my own human relation to seeing a father and son—that drew me to look closer. There is something timeless yet contemporary about the moment of these images, something familiar in the familial yet so frightening in the transmission of malevolence from one generation

to the next. “Surely some revelation is at hand,” wrote Yeats—and perhaps the revelation in this era of Charleston and Charlottesville (and Ferguson and Isla Vista and Standing Rock . . .) is that we must “fix” these moments so that we truly see them.⁴

When the *Washington Post* published Hillsborough writer Steven Petrow's opinion piece about that day, they chose not to run an image from the Klan gathering in Hillsborough and ran instead an archival image from a cross burning near Yanceyville, North Carolina, from two years earlier. It is an image that, shall we say, keeps its distance, a nighttime cross burning out in the country, not of a peaceful Sunday afternoon in the middle of town. What is it we fear in calling it as it is, of showing what happened and to whom? Perhaps we fear misinterpretation or confrontation or retraumatizing communities who've (historically) had to bear these assaults and threats. Or perhaps we worry that we're giving too much credence to these folks, that by picturing them we are somehow propelling them forward, unintentionally affirming their behavior. But if we don't take the picture in the first place—if we don't respond honestly to the moment—we can't even begin this conversation with ourselves and others, can't decide whether to publish or show an image (since it doesn't exist), can't deliberate about the correct course of action. That, too, is part of our collective moment—and part of the revelation at hand. To do something about what we see—that phrase “if you see something, say something”—par-

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ticularly when what we see is in plain sight, in the public sphere, intended to intimidate and disturb, to disrupt and scare, is our task as documentarians. Visual expression speaks in ways that words can't, and documentary images of the dark as well as the radiant, of hatred as well as the beloved community, are vital. There is no way I can make a "pretty" picture of the Ku Klux Klan. Who really desires to take or see an image like that? Yet, Bresson's "precise instant" and Stryker's "vital significance" urge us to look squarely at what we find on our doorstep, perhaps especially when it is reprehensible and dangerous, and create evidence from the moment.⁵

Documentary artists might find it a challenge to be living in an age when everything seems to be photographed or otherwise documented by our smartphones. The sheer number and ubiquity of images poses new challenges in this era, yet it is incumbent upon documentary artists to make work that rises above the noise and compels us to face the truth through images, sounds, personal documents. Now more than ever, we need nuanced documentary expression to hold the present up in stark clarity, a kind of mirror of our moment. We need those images that leave us wondering whether we are in the past or in the present, documentary stories that challenge us to see the darkness and light, what we thought, or wished, was gone that is clearly still in our midst. To look away, to not record, is always a choice, but that is akin to refusing to listen to calls of admonition, to the satisfied laughter of community, to the howl of the lost and forgotten. There is no future in doing nothing about what we see around us. The documentary moment is never generic, is never without particularities of place, weather, politics. This moment we live in now, it seems, has more dark clouds than clear skies. If we are to make an honest rendering of this time, we need to include those shadows within and among our images of more cherished light. ⑤

NOTES

- 1 Eudora Welty, "Literature and the Lens," originally published in *Vogue*, August 1, 1944. Reprinted in *Eudora Welty: Occasions; Selected Writings*, ed. Pearl Amelia McHaney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 71.
- 2 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), n.p.
- 3 Roy Stryker, "Documentary Photography," *The Complete Photographer: A Complete Guide to Amateur and Professional Photography*, ed. Willard D. Morgan, vol. 4 (New York: National Educational Alliance, 1943), 1942.
- 4 William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," Poetry Foundation, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>.
- 5 Steven Petrow, "The KKK Came to My Town. But Hate Has No Home Here," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/30/kkk-came-my-town-hate-has-no-home-here/>.