Is It Ever Just a Peek?

An Analysis on the Ethical Discrepancies on Documentary Photography and the Politics of Looking

Jazmin MacDowall

Abstract

This research analysis delves into ethical discrepancies regarding documentary-style photography. Photography has become a powerful medium and practice of both communication and social connection. One specific genre of photography that evokes questions of entitlement, social hierarchy, and ethical concerns regarding the politics of looking is documentary-style photography. Documentary photography involves the process of capturing impersonal human subjects within the guise of daily existence; typically, these moments of existence involve unromanticized and even unfiltered experiences. Research exploring the ethical concerns of surveillance, voyeurism, and perpetuating social hierarchies involved in documentary photography concludes that the outcomes and artistic spaces involved in promoting 'othering' between producer/consumer and subject matter are what maintain the inconclusive or nebulous standings on the ethics of documentary photography. A specific analysis of work by photographer Martin Parr highlights such debates and clarifies questions scholars prompt readers to reflect upon. Parr's oeuvre alludes to a manipulation of lived experiences into spectacle. Viewers become enmeshed in a process of truth creation and confirmation, rather than objective viewership

Keywords

Documentary, Photography, Voyeurism, Politics of Looking, Ethics

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Department of Communication, Media and Film

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The process of visual documentation has been a foundational project intrinsic within the human experience. As author William Stott (1986) explains, documentary is not defined as a genre but rather an impulse. Beyond its function in categorizing visual material, documentary photography is fundamentally driven by the photographer's immediate impulse to record what they see, which allows the capture of the human condition in visual form. Commonly, documentation is perceived as the official truth, implying an accepted fact. However, Stott (1986) also explains, "a document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal" (p. 7). Personalization, therefore, emerges through bias, creating an ethical enigma. Furthermore, this paper argues that documentary photography inherently creates a power imbalance between photographer and subject, producing an ethical paradox in which the visual outcome, rather than artistic intent, defines perceived truth. Through an examination of Martin Parr's *The Last Resort*, this paper discusses how voyeurism, vulgarity and social hierarchy converge to construct a manufactured reality, exacerbating the politics of looking.

The ethics of documentary photography remain contested, as the medium's inherent subjectivity challenges claims of objective representation. Within this genre of photography, humans become the focal point of documentation, but in an impersonal manner. Additionally, the impersonal nature becomes ethically ambiguous because the surrounding subject matter exposes the uncomfortable and unaesthetic moments of the human condition. Contemporary photographer Martin Parr reflects this disconnect between producer and subject by peeking into his subjects' lives and turning fleeting moments into permanence. Scholars of communicative photography have debated the ethics and power dynamics which perpetuate the convoluted enigma regarding a photographer's entitlement to trap the human condition in physical media.

William Stott (1986) expresses a dialectical understanding of documentary photography between objective, logistical snapshots and social documentation, where objective acknowledgments are disoriented by fictional interpretations, such as those in photography. In this context, objective refers to a cleansing of bias, achieving total perceived actuality. As researcher Emma Arnold conveys (2021), "photography is ultimately concerned with the ephemeral–with capturing and preserving transient moments" (p. 1). Documentary photography in the unofficial form (Stott, 1986) is perpetuated by feeling rather than logic. The feeling is an innate need to capture the fleeting and perplexing nature of the human experience, trapping it in

a permanent physical form: the photograph. Stott uses American documentary photography during the Great Depression as a case study to explore this interpretation. He emphasizes that documentary artists sought to capture the reality of American life, using this immediacy to reveal the era's underlying power dynamics and social inequalities. The photographers captured the emotional turmoil many were experiencing, outsourcing families participating in the Dust Bowl migration as a common subject to document. Furthermore, Andrew Stefan Weiner (2013) adds to this notion of documenting sensitive events, stating, “doubts arise at a moment when photography already appears vulnerable, in that its unprecedented ubiquity seems to have come at the cost of its persuasive power” (p. 95). Through this, Weiner questions the motivation behind the act of photography. Collectively, the authors question how the goal of palatability amalgamated with “social documentary encourag[ing] social improvement” (Stott, 1986, p.21), to highlight the underpinnings of the power imbalances produced by social documentary.

This action or impulse (Stott, 1986) provoked by a need is not a neutral action, because transferring documentation to the visual has a disorienting effect. As artist and photographer Martha Rosler (2004) describes, “documentary, with its original muckraking associations, preceded the myth of journalistic objectivity and was partly strangled by it” (p. 176). This means that photography is widely perceived through a positivist lens. The consumption of visual media fosters a subconscious expectation of objectivity, relaying the foundational truth. If documentary photography becomes interwoven with journalistic underpinnings, then the perception of a photographer’s entitlement to record suffering can be framed as a moral duty. However, this duty perpetuates social hierarchy, maintaining distance between those behind the lens and the subjects on the other side and creating a dichotomy between them. The distance enforces an othering dynamic, reducing the photograph’s subjects to inferiority. Connecting scholar bell hooks and their concept of “eating the Other” (hooks 2014, p. 21), the otherness of a person or group of people evolves into sources of entertainment and pleasure that can be commodified. Capturing the supposed truth comes at the cost of those experiencing othering. Because they are gifted with a level of trust from consumers and are receiving a sense of the truth, documentary photographers inherently possess power. This permits authority for documentary photographers to visually define a reality as shown before their eyes, which is accepted as a guarantee of authenticity of the scene captured via the camera.

Documentary photography connects to cultural theorist Michel Foucault's theory, “the regime of truth,” which explains how our socio-cultural truths are not discovered but produced. The utility of an artistic medium, photography, enacts systemic surveillance and produces politically homogenized narratives. Essentially, documentary photographers act as gatekeepers of truth. Viewers consume social conditions and experiences shaped through subjective lenses, which complies with Foucault’s theory that the truth is not naturally discovered but artificially created. Obtaining the power to impulsively capture the truth evidently manufactures a power imbalance. Both Stott and Rosler comment on how the politics of looking exposes the exploitative nature of documentary photography. Rosler (2004) questions, “are photographic images, then, like civilization, made on the backs of the exploited?” (p.185). This exposes the ethical paradox of documentary photography, where intentions or impulses from the photographer, whether motivated by malicious or curious thought, exploit the subjects of the image. Therefore, this case study of Martin Parr will be utilized to explore and highlight contemporary instances of power imbalances and understand the questions of exploitation.

Martin Parr is a British documentary photographer and photojournalist whose career spans from the 1970s to the present day. The British art institute Tate describes Parr as being known for “his photographic projects that take an intimate, satirical and anthropological look at aspects of modern life, in particular documenting the social classes of England, and more broadly the wealth of the Western world” (Tate, n.d., p.1). Disassembling this description supports the claims of social disparity and muddled morality within documentary photography as articulated by Stott and Rosler. For example, describing Parr’s projects as anthropological mirrors Stott’s characterization of documentary photography as a social project of understanding that resembles an ethnographic approach. The inclusion of satire as an adjective for Parr’s work reflects Rosler’s argument that documentary photography functions as an othering tactic, ostracizing its subjects and maintaining hierarchical divisions. Altogether, Tate’s description of Parr embodies this paper’s revelations of documentary photography. Examining images from his most infamous collection, *The Last Resort,* further reveals the power imbalances and ethical disparities identified earlier.

The Last Resort collection is situated in the earlier half of Martin Parr’s career. The project spans from 1983 to1985, in New Brighton, England (Huxley-Parlour Gallery, n.d.). Operating as an ethnographic time capsule, the collection depicts the raw and unbecoming nature

of the working-class coastal holiday experience of the 1980s. The collection's showcasing in London's Serpentine Gallery in 1986 (Tipton-Amini, 2021) caused public attention and, with it, social divide. Art critic Davi Lee had a particular distaste toward Parr's *The Last Resort.* According to Lee:

> [Parr] has habitually discovered visitors at their worst, greedily eating and drinking junk food and discarding containers and wrappers with an abandon likely to send a liberal conscience into paroxysms of sanctimony. Even moments of petting intimacy appear pathetic given their gaudy surroundings and the posturing of its protagonists. Our historic working class, normally dealt with generously by documentary photographers, becomes a sitting duck for a more sophisticated audience. They appear fat, simple, styleless, tediously conformist and unable to assert any individual identity. They wear cheap flashy clothes and in true conservative fashion are resigned to their meagre lot. Only babies and children survive ridicule, and it is their inclusion in many pictures which gives Parr's acerbic vision of hopelessness its poetic touch (Lee, 1986, as cited by Williams, 2002, p.159)

Evidently, critics likeminded to Lee perceived Parr's work as distasteful, a true testament to the voyeuristic nature documentary photographs often convey. Lee's perspective reflects the destructive nature behind hooks' othering process. hooks (2014) comments on maintaining a racial divide in artistic spaces, specifically, "in mass culture, (where) imperialist nostalgia takes the form of reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other" (p. 25). While Parr's collection is not relative to race, it does use this tactic of artistic confirmation of difference or othering. The quote acknowledges the pairing of prejudice from the creator and fetishization of the subject in a manner that keeps a particular class divide intact.

Granted, Lee's perspective stems from a particular subsection of viewership; the more bourgeois crowd of consumers (Tipton-Amini, 2021). Lee's social position as an art critic stands higher than that of the subjects depicted in *The Last Resort*, further entrenching the existing power imbalance. In an opposing argument, the Huxley-Parlor gallery recounted, "[Parrs] interest was not focused on class discrepancies, but rather on the everyday truisms that we all

experience, be it a screaming child or bad weather. The photographer captured working-class reality with a 'warts-and-all' attitude, displaying characters with a truthful, unreserved manner" (n.d., p.1). This perspective opposes hooks' theory but does still coincide with Foucault's idea that the realities we understand are merely artificial. The everyday truisms are because Parr decided based on his nuanced and personal experiences. Discrepancies between Lee and Parr's interpretations regarding the project reveal the conflicting catalyst of the underlying ethical problem of documentary photography. While intent does hold weight, visual outcome matters more when deciphering ethical concerns and artificial perceptions of documentary photography. An analysis of three images from *The Last Resort* will further highlight this argument.

To clarify, no image in Parr's collection *The Last Resort* possesses its own label. Each photograph is merely a part of the whole collection. The images chosen can only be labelled as figures and not by any title.

Figure 1: *The Last Resort*, Martin Parr, 1983-1985



Note: Patrons tanning on the beach in New Brighton, England.

Figure 1 captures a woman suntanning; her back is toward the sky, and she appears disassociated with her surroundings. Though she is suntanning, the location is peculiar. She is not on a beach, but what appears to be a loading dock. There is a large piece of machinery parked next to her. In addition, there is a child playing with toys near the woman's head, but she too appears unbothered by the unorthodox location. Water is visible in the background, insinuating a beach may be near. However, the location, dissociation of subjects, combined with

garbage strung about and machinery casually embedded in the image, evokes a chaotic and uncanny feeling. The uncanny locale heightens the comical undertones of the image and overall collection. The juxtaposed genres of comedy and documentary-style photography evoke an overarching othering (hooks, 2014) narrative, because Parr holds the advantage. Weiner (2013) explains how the privilege of the camera has become misconstrued into entitlement, explaining that "the number of photographs now taken yearly rivals the number taken during the entire history of predigital photography… our attitude towards images still often verges on boredom, nonchalance or fatigue" (p. 96). Society has adapted to the unsolicited documentation of others, so people are left bored rather than outraged.

Figure 2 captures a discombobulated crowd of people surrounding a food counter. The attire of most figures suggests they are near water, as most are in swimsuits and wrapped in towels. All figures appear to be white and middle class, based on clothing and overall aesthetic appearance. The lack of overhead lighting in a space crammed full of people emphasizes a feeling of claustrophobia. Again, not a single subject seems aware

Figure 2: *The Last Resort*, Martin Parr, 1983-1985



Note: Inside a concession booth, full of Patrons in New Brighton, England, mid-1980s.

of the camera, but instead are in their own world, amongst the chaos. Based on the image's mise-en-scène, we feel the "othering" (hooks, 2014, p.21) enforced by the producer, as the

figures are tightly gathered behind the counter, separated from the photographer and viewers like caged animals.

The last image, Figure 3, is in a seemingly similar location to Figure 1. Both images showcase people sunbathing in industrial areas, and the position of the camera is above the figures, reaffirming a power imbalance. Figure 3 centers a crying baby, propped in a highchair. Below the baby, a woman appears exhausted. Behind the two figures is another woman, in a swimsuit lounging on a towel, indicating this is a popular

Figure 3: *The Last Resort*, Martin Parr, 1983-1985



Note: Patrons tanning under the boardwalk at New Brighton Beach, England, in the mid-1980s.

spot for sun tanning, with no water in proximity again. The two groups appear not to be from the same party. In this sense, the claustrophobic narrative is present again. This image highlights the cramped urban restrictions associated with middle- and lower-class spaces, even in nature.

Examining the photos as a collective reveals a conjoining theme. Across all three images, we do not see any subject interacting with the camera directly. No singular individual seems aware of Parr or the camera's presence. This notion amplifies the feeling of invasion, a clear sense of voyeurism for the viewers. Moreover, the photographs present a juxtaposition: each scene is captured in a public place, yet the voyeuristic undertones perpetuate a feeling of invasion of a private event, a metaphorical pulling back the curtain. The lack of subject awareness and connectivity reinforces the impulsive and exploitative component of documentary

photography discussed by Stott and Rosler. The three images do convey Parr's "unreserved manner" (Huxley-Parlor, n.d.,p.1), inflating the role of the photographer's intent in the causation of documentary photography's power imbalance. Therefore, this lack of reservation shapes how subjects are perceived without their knowledge or consent.

Parr's flippant attitude can be perceived as vulgar when compared to Lee's interpretation of the collection, which also connects to the boredom described by Weiner (2013). In Figures 1 to 3, Martin emphasizes a highly saturated tonal value and includes a flash setting during the daytime, giving his images a rather abrasive feeling. The stark colours disorient viewers' reception and force feelings of aggression. The colours add their own noise to the already loud images. Another juxtaposition technique Parr includes is the human experience of pleasurable leisure and decay, by the combination of garbage and dirty environments immersed in scenes of joy and vacationing. For example, Figures 1 and 3 display people lounging and sunbathing next to plastic bags and empty fast-food containers. This is an example of Parr exploiting the inhabitants of his images for his own satirical pleasure. His confrontational nature is spliced with social immorality, knowing his desire to capture a fleeting human experience came at the cost of those experiencing it.

Visual outcome has the greatest negative social effects when considering the politics of looking and Foucault's "the regime of truth." Figures 1 to 3 connect back to Lee's (1986) reflection on the collection: "our historic working class, normally dealt with generously by documentary photographers, becomes a sitting duck for a more sophisticated audience" (as cited by Williams, 2002, p. 159). Like many documentary collections, Parr's photography was displayed for gallery viewership, framing the working class as a spectacle. The project's outcome, combined with the images' circulation, granted Parr the authority to define the truth of what New Brighton and the working class who vacationed there looked like. The process of displaying these images in a gallery reaffirms the process of othering (hooks, 2014), because the consumers of the photographs are not the social groups within the images themselves, but rather a complete other (higher) social class, perpetuating classism. By legitimizing Parr's artistic narrative in a commodified space, through the logic of Foucault's theory, viewers are encouraged to absorb the visual rhetoric of the images as logistical fact rather than artistic interpretation.

The photographs curate a discourse about British society in the 1980s, one which favours certain narratives, such as dysfunction, gluttony and tawdryness, over potentially more positive examples like community resilience. Ultimately, the photographs trap the outcome, not the intent. The subjects and environment captured through Parr's lens immerse them in this linear visual narrative, forever. The outcome of documentary photography does not merely reveal Foucault's "the regime of truth" but also helps formulate it. Therefore, moral obligation or reverence aside, the outcome of documentary photography maintains a deep-rooted ethical issue, where subjects are faced with exploitation for the sake of impulse from the photographer.

This analysis reveals that documentary photography is deeply entangled with power, subjectivity, and ethical ambiguity. Stott's arguments, paired with Rosler's critique of the medium's exploitative potential, illustrate that documenting reality is not a neutral act but one that actively shapes meaning, reinforces social hierarchies and influences perception. Martin Parr's *The Last Resort* demonstrates this tension, as exaggerated colour, intrusive framing, and a lack of subject awareness and consent produce a voyeuristic spectacle that grants power to the photographer's gaze. Viewed through the lens of Michel Foucault's "regime of truth", Parr's work does not merely document British working-class life in New Brighton during the 1980s; it actively contributes to constructing and reinforcing assigned class-based stereotypes and social distancing. bell hooks' theory of the Other supports the idea that photography perpetuates social divides between vulnerable groups and those in power. Ultimately, this paper argues that within documentary photography, ethical responsibility lies more heavily within visual outcome than with artistic intent. This is because images possess the power to trap individuals within curated realities, manipulating lived experiences into spectacle and confirming that documentary photography does not reveal the truth, but creates it.

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