Every photograph is in some sense a document of something else. The very essence of the photograph is its ability to make pictorial ‘documents’ of events, be they an abstracted photograph of glass objects arranged and exposed in a darkroom, or an image of a car running a red light recorded by an automatic traffic camera. Nonetheless, the word ‘documentary’ is now used to describe a very particular photographic style, or even a particular historical movement, and a complex set of borderlines moral attitudes to the medium passionately adhered to by some photographers. To the documentary photographer the camera is a tool with which they can personally witness, and possibly even change, the world.

During the American Civil War (1861–65), the photographer Mathew Brady hired a corps of photographers to cover all of the major battles for him from their photographic vans, feeding a hungry market in the cities with more than 8000 stereoviewers and cartes-de-visite which were available for sale from Brady’s New York studio. Some were also hand-cut into wood engravings for illustrated magazines. Although the vast majority of the photographs were routinely mundane, the battle views which, because of long exposure times had to be taken after the event, quickly became the most famous. Even though some photographers rearranged the corpse-strewn battlefields, dragging the corpses into more dramatic compositions and even getting assistants to pose as additional corpses, the visceral connection such photographs forged between the war and the viewer at home was overwhelming. In 1862 the New York Times commented: ‘If [Mr Brady] has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it... These pictures have a truthful distinctness. By the aid of a magnifying glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished.’

Towards the end of the 1880s the New York police reporter turned social reformer Jacob Riis began to use the flare of magnesium flash powder to penetrate the obscurity of the slums of the Lower East Side. His flash photographs captured his dishevelled subjects in a state of the devotion to the camera’s presence. As the New York Sun reported, the ‘night pictures were beautiful and characteristic, being mostly snapshots and surprises. In the daytime the photographers could not always avoid having their object known, and struggle as they might against it, they could not altogether prevent the natural instinct of fixing up for a picture from being followed’. Riis showed his pictures as lantern slides with accompanying commentary, and published them, not as hand-cut wood engravings but as direct half-tone reproductions, in the serial work How the Other Half Lives 1889. As a result of his campaigning, significant changes were made to the laws surrounding New York’s tenements.

The National Child Labour Committee (NCLC) also recognised the persuasive power of the Photograph. Between 1908 and 1918 they hired the sociologist Lewis Wickes Hine to travel around America taking photographs of child labourers in mines and factories. Hine used...
deliberate camera angles and framing to emphasize the small stature and pathetic isolation of the child workers, and recorded their names, ages, origins, and circumstances. The resulting images, such as *Dinner Time*, *Family of Mrs A J Young Ritten*, GA 1909, Raymond Byers, Western Union, Norfolk, VA 1911; and Norman Halp, Lincolne, GA 1913, were published in the social-reform magazine Survey, and used for lantern slide lectures and posters. In the posters the photographs were often laid out graphically to visually tell a story. In *Making human junk*, for instance, the "good material" of healthy children is processed by a factory into the "junk" of child labourers. To her the photograph was a "symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality... it tells a story packed into the most condensed and vital form... it is more effective than the reality would have been because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated."

By the 1920s the word "documentary" was being used to describe this new genre of photography. In 1926 the influential British film theorist John Grierson coined the word "documentary" to describe the "creative treatment of actuality." The photos, somewhat gnomically captured the photographer's double sense of the camera penetrating a raw social reality, supposedly unaffected by the photographer's presence, while at the same time the photographer's "vision" selected, interpreted, and narrativized that reality in order for it to have maximum impact on the viewer.

This ethic reached its full flowering during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 1935 the American Government, under its New Deal policies, set up the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Its Historical Section conducted a photographic survey of rural deprivation. The economist Roy Stryker hired a group of photographers, including Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, to travel across the continent, particularly in the impoverished South, and send back exposed film to him in Washington to be developed, collated, captioned, and distributed to newspapers and magazines.

By the end of its life the FSA had assembled an archive of 180,000 images.

Dorothea Lange had previously produced documentary photographs of Depression poverty such as *White Angel Breadline*, San Francisco 1933 which, with its dynamic composition, dramatically compressed the human tension in the scene. For the FSA she produced another image with a similarly compressed triangular composition -- *Migrant Mother* 1936. It was reproduced immediately in the San Francisco News, leading to its being sent to the peapicker's camp where it had been taken, and was hung in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941 becoming a national icon of modernist female in the face of suffering.

Walker Evans shot his subjects frontally with a large-format camera, describing, as in *Untitled 1933* street scene, Southern city, 1938, the solidity of scenes and forms in objective, rectilinear detail. In 1938 he exhibited his FSA photographs at the Museum of Modern Art and published them in the monograph *American Photographers*. For the first time, rather than being reproduced among columns of text in magazines and newspapers, they were reproduced as entire newspaper pages, one image at a time, with minimal captioning. The introduction to the book described Evans's work as "straight" photography: "there has been no need for Evans to dramatize material with photographic tricks, because the material is already, in itself, intensely dramatic. Even the inanimate things, bureau drawers, pots, tins, bricks, signs, seen waiting in their own pallid dignity, pose for their picture."

In 1938 Evans had lived for a time in the shack of an Alabama sharecropper family. On assignment for *Fortune* magazine, he and the writer James Agee praised into the minute of downtrodden lives as they shared this private space. When Evans's fine-grained images of the dry, scrubbed surfaces of the house and the lined, weathered faces of the family were reproduced (together with Agee's extended lyrical text) in the book *Let us now praise famous men* 1941, they served to not only dignify, but almost elevate, the family's abject poverty.
Many FSA-style photographs were reproduced in Life magazine, the most famous picture magazine of the period. Commencing publication in 1936, Life used new high-speed presses, coated paper-stock and quick-drying inks to cheaply reproduce photographs in both quality and quantity. Featuring easy-to-digest ‘picture stories’ - that is, photographs with short captions spread across several pages - Life reached a circulation of six million by 1940, before the alternative entertainment of television began to erode its sales figures.

Life’s optimistic patriotism and belief in American values fed directly into a massive exhibition of 503 giant photographic enlargements selected from 273 photographers by the famous photographer and curator Edward Steichen. Called ‘The Family of Man’, it was exhibited as a spectacular installation at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, and then toured the world in several versions as a form of Cold War propaganda, even reaching Moscow in 1959. It saw the human race as one big ‘family’, modelled on the supposed ideal of the American nuclear family, and celebrated birth, love, marriage and death as eternal humanist values. The exhibition was massively popular, but was not without its critics. When it reached Paris in 1956 the cultural icon Roland Barthes excoriated it for clearing continuing social inequalities across the world with supposed ‘universal’ values.

Whether or not the child is born with ease or difficulty, whether or not his birth causes suffering to his mother, whether or not he is threatened by a high mortality rate, whether or not such and such a type of future is open to him, this is what your Exhibitions should be telling people, instead of the eternal lyricism of birth. The same goes for death: must we really celebrate its essence once more, and thus risk forgetting that there is still so much we can do to fight it?  

The advent of smaller cameras such as the Leica, designed to use cinematographic 35mm film stock and introduced in 1925, allowed photographers to work in more difficult and different places. Picture agencies, such as Berlin’s Dephot agency founded in 1928, or New York’s Black Star agency founded in 1936, began to supply photographs from their networks of photographers to the new, cheap mass circulation, slick-through picture magazines such as Die Freiheit (established 1884), Britain’s Picture Post (established 1938) and France’s L’Affiche (established 1931), which used skilled graphic designers to lay out visually exciting collages of image and text.

In 1936 the British agency photographer Robert Capa to cover the Spanish Civil War, where he photographed a falling republic soldier. When the photograph was published by Life the following year it was captioned: “Robert Capa’s camera catches a Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet through the head in front of Cordoba.” Although recent scholarship has convincingly suggested that this famous photograph was staged, it is still a benchmark for 20th-century photojournalism because it gave the viewer a strong sense of the état de bravoure of the photographer risking his own life so the viewer could be vicariously immersed in the unfolding event.

Henri Cartier-Bresson switched to the Leica in 1932 and began a career photographing around the world and selling his images through picture agencies. He photographed nimblly, fleeting quickly and unnoticed through events, seeking the instant where the three dimensions of the event, and the two dimensions of the photograph, would cohere into what he called the ‘Decisive moment’. In his 1952 book The Decisive Moment he wrote: “In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, [a] product of the instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject ... But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of light.”
Once their photographs are out in the public domain, can they protect their meanings from being hijacked by the many different contexts in which they are used, and the different captions they are given? Are they not just feeding our desire for short-term spectacle, our need to visually consume a momentary "hit" of pity or disgust before we turn the page?

Photographers have responded to these questions in a variety of ways. For instance Larry Clark in Tulsa 1971 or Nan Golden in The ballad of sexual depravity 1989 abandoned any sense of sociological objectivity or creative distance as they photographed from within their own lives, documenting the subcultures they were members of and the desperate events they actively took part in. Other photographers, such as Laura Mulvey in The bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems 1975, attempted to reveal the "constructed" nature of photographic truth by treating their photographs not as self-sufficient and self-explanatory entities of reality, but by embedding them in laborious structures of textual qualification which declared that photography too was just another language system. The Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar took photographs in Rwanda, Africa, just after the massacres of 1994. He wanted to bear witness to the genocide, but refused to food the world with yet more disposable images of horror and despair. Instead, in the work Real pictures 1995, he built funerary monuments out of 3720 oval black boxes, each one containing one of his colour photographs of the massacres, with a textual description of the unseen image on the top of the box. Recently the "other half", once the mere passive subject of the documentary photographer's compassionate camera, has now become an image-maker as well. Examples include Britain's Black Audio Film Collective which was set up by black photographers and filmmakers in Hackney in London in 1982 in the aftermath of inner-city protests against racism.

Perhaps the enduring thing documentary photography has bequeathed to us is not so much the familiar historical icon it has produced over its history, but its vast repositories of millions of unknown images which are now collected in picture libraries and data banks around the world. Many of them, like the Corbis archive, founded by Bill Gates in 1989, are now online and instantly accessible. But even these mammoth documentary archives, which have consumed smaller picture libraries, photo agency and newspaper collections, are being invaded by the smaller quirky personal collections and the diverse vernacular archives which are constantly being unearthed. Perhaps these personal snapshots and anonymous record photographs, which were taken not in order to advance a social cause or express a creative vision, will ultimately be just as valuable to us as those taken under the banner of 'documentary'.

Maryn Jolly