On Seeing the Same Thing

One evening, having read my notebook, he designed a totem for Brian Jones. It was shaped like an arrow, with rabbit hair for the White Rabbit, a line from Winnie the Pooh, and a locket-sized portrait of Brian. We finished it together and hung it over our bed. "Nobody sees as we do Patti", he said again. Whenever he said things like that, for a magical space of time, it was as if we were the only two people in the world (Patti Smith, Just Kids, p. 103-104).

In the first part of this thesis I describe an inborn tension within the concept of visual record. The tension is present during the whole development of this concept in science, art and philosophy, but takes slightly different forms. At the end of the 19th century it is evident that the notion of visual record is paradoxical. On one hand, the visual record is a building block in the rationalization of the visual field, the compartmentalization of the world into an encyclopedic indexical visual order. On the other hand, the visual record is a concept that points away from the conditioned and readily interpreted visual world toward the ephemeral nature as it exists within itself. The way in which this dialectic between the rationalized visual order and an image beyond human conditioning limits the discourse on images is one of the key problems that I want to address in the following chapters. I will continue by focusing on the concept of visual record, photography, film and the division of images into the categories of documentary and fiction. And, I will continue to show how this tension, created by the idea of an image as a neutral record, will reveal itself in discourses on the documentary from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. However I will not continue with a genealogical approach. The reason for dividing this thesis into two parts is for me to be able to change gear. In the following chapters I will concentrate on more specific and contemporary philosophical questions concerning the documentary, vision, knowledge, the self and the other. I will not try to construct any comprehensive theory on documentary images, but rather discuss some examples of documentary depiction. Through this discussion I will hopefully be able to grasp something of what is at the core of the concept of the documentary and the visual record without falling in to the same conceptual pitfalls that I have outlined in the first part of this thesis.
As I have shown the conceptual problems inherent in the understanding of an image as somehow neutral stem from empiricism and the proclaimed connection between vision, representation and epistemology. Nietzsche describes this as a confusion between the familiar and the unknown, he writes “And what a nice delusion we had perpetrated with this “empirical evidence”; we interpreted the real world as a world of causes, a world of wills, a world of spirits […] Small wonder that later he always found in things what he already had put in them” (Twilight of the idols: The four errors, §3). What Nietzsche points out is how the 19th century scientist claimed to explain the unknown, without taking into account that he himself already had predetermined the ways in which the unknown should be represented and consequently how it should be systematically interpreted. This tension caused by the idea of a neutral form of representation with heavy ties to the invention and use of photography, is present later on in the practices of documentary representation. As long as that which is represented is unknown, it is preposterous to claim that one knows how that unknown should be represented. This is one of the paradoxes that I claim is at the core of documentary representation. Photography and later on film, have in some cases played the role of an instrument that turns the unknown into something known. However, as I have shown in the first part of this thesis, a medium of depiction can not carry such proficiency by itself.

The idea of photography as a tool for science depended on its ability to capture views that the eye could not see. Although this actually sometimes can be the case, this idea often entails conceptual confusion. Take for instance Ernst Mach’s photography of a bullet in flight.

As I have pointed out (chapter 3), Mach’s photograph seems to indicate that natural phenomena, the existence of shockwaves, are present in the picture despite the fact that the photograph is a result of human conditioning. Mach’s photograph seems to indicate that the camera can see differently or better than the human eye. The photograph of the shockwaves
seemed to prove a natural occurrence that is not accessible to the naked human eye. But we have to keep in mind that this fact, that shockwaves appear in front of objects with a supersonic velocity, is still brought to our attention through the conditioning that photography entails. This does of course not mean that shockwaves only exist in photographs. They appear in nature with or without our attention to them. In this way the photograph brings out a natural occurrence, it draws our attention to the shock-wave and makes it visible. The problem starts to arise when this kind of example is used as a correlate to a general epistemological theory in which objective knowledge stems from the natural. If we consider the concept of knowledge, it can not exist beyond our attention. I can not know something that I am not aware of. There are facts that are true despite my knowledge of them, but my knowledge can not be beyond my attention, judgment or memory, hence the concept of knowledge can not be reduced to mere natural facts.

This indicates how the concept of meaning differs from the concept of factual knowledge. What can be meaningfully said about a certain view is not governed by the epistemological dichotomies: truth/falsity, appearance/reality, correct/distorted etc. Donald Evans points out how this difference between truth/falsity and meaning has in many ways been neglected in the discussion about photography.¹ I believe that this has to do with the fact that the philosophy concerning vision and the visible for certain reasons, to a large extent has concentrated on the epistemological problems and isolated these issues from those concerned with meaning and understanding. When we look into the significance of a thing, a view, a scene or a state of affairs, we ask questions that go beyond the dichotomy of truth and falsity. In cases like Mach’s bullet photograph, photography seems to bring us views that are alien, and at the same time supposedly natural. The gap between what we can see and how nature supposedly looks seems to indicate that the natural world is not properly accessible through sense perception. Due to this kind of understanding the role of the instrument, the camera and the photograph becomes paramount in science. The photograph as record becomes an intermediary that helps the scientist interpret nature properly. But a photograph can not be seen to communicate something that we are not able to grasp from the start. As Donald Evans points out: “However accurate the copy is only understood if what it is a copy of is itself understood. […] If the camera is to be said to see anything at all it can only be said to see

what the viewer of the photograph can see".\(^2\) That is, even in such presumably clear cases of objective depiction like in Mach’s bullet photograph, the photograph makes something visible and in this way communicates something that occurs in nature. But if we were not able to make the connection between what the photograph shows and the occurrence of shock-waves, if we were not able to have some kind of sensual or non-sensual knowledge of shock-waves from start, then the photograph would not show us anything specific, the shockwaves could be smudges on the objective of the camera, cloud formations etc., etc. If Mach’s photograph can serve as evidence of the existence of shock-waves, it presupposes that we see the same thing when we view the picture. The circumstance that we see the same thing is not solely governed by the natural occurrence and its representation, but more importantly by an acknowledgement of the correspondence between the occurrence and its representation. That is, the fact that we know that it is shock-waves that are depicted can not stem from the photograph alone, it has to be acknowledged in communication, not only between object, image and subject, but also amongst a community of subjects.

With this discussion I want to bring forth two important points. On the one hand photography can capture events, details, features that the photographer and perhaps a whole community of observers are not able to pay attention to. In this sense there is something peculiar and characteristically objective, in a certain use of photography. It can present us with alien views because everything that is registered on film can not be intentional. Every detail in a photograph is not controlled by the photographer and in this way it truly can capture the unknown (I will return to this non-intentional aspect of photography in chapter 5). However what we pay attention to in our visual field or in a photograph is not arbitrary. Our attention and our ways of seeing are inherent in our culture, our language, and our forms of life. In order for us to see, for example the shockwaves in Mach’s photograph as shockwaves, we have to be informed by, not only nature and the photograph, but by the understanding of other people.

It is not enough for me and my goals to point out the discrepancy present in the venture of erecting a visual order and then using this rationalization and compartmentalization of the visual field to describe the unconditioned, the natural and the ephemeral. In what follows, I want to clarify how this epistemic model of representation sidesteps the moral issues present in contemporary discourses on documentary images. If we stick to the epistemological framework and constantly keep asking the same questions concerning the

images truth value and likeness, we shy away from the more pressing questions concerning how one can communicate something that one holds to be true by the means of images. What I want to make clear in this second part of the thesis is the way in which images are a part of our moral lives and how this relation does not primarily depend on a relation between object and representation, but on a relation of trust, accountability and understanding, i.e. a discursive moral relation between two subjects via the mediation of an image. Through trusting or distrusting an image we also trust or distrust an expression made by somebody, we agree or disagree with her perception, her understanding and her judgment. In this sense knowledge and understanding does not consist of mere facts, neither does it consist of mere re-presentation, copying or recording. It also depends on trusting and understanding the judgment of the other. Michael D. Jackson describes this kind of emphasize on the intersubjectivity of judgment in relation to knowledge in Hannah Arendt’s philosophy as follows:

Unlike classical empiricism, where the observer makes himself a *tabula rasa* in order to register his impressions of the observed, judging requires active engagement and conversation – allowing *one’s own thoughts* to be influenced by thoughts of others. Accordingly, judging implies a third position, reducible to neither one’s own nor the other’s: a view from in-between, from within the shared space of intersubjectivity itself. (Jackson, p. 238)

Arendt does not think about images specifically in this context; however I think that the concept of image in one sense has exactly this function, to serve as “a view from in-between” subjects. A successful image functions in agreement not only with the judgment, understanding and perception of the producer of the image, but also with the judgment, understanding and perception of the viewer of the image. In this way views, in the deeper meaning of the word, are shared by the means of images. A long line of thought concerning images has relegated this role of the image as a communicator between two subjects to obscurity and favored an understanding of the image as solely a business between the subject and the object. The emphasize on the objective visual record within science and epistemology narrows down the understanding of the concept of image to something highly specialized and, as I have shown, something that sidesteps the influence of the subject’s judgment. That which is sidestepped in the discourse on the concept of visual record is not only the subject with her judgment, psychology, attention, memory etc. More importantly, the 400 year history of this specific way of defining an image as primarily objective, sidesteps the presence of *the other* –
the you that is addressed through the workings of images. (Continue Arendt) Philosophy, with some exceptions (Pierce, ??), has dealt with a very restricted model of the image, in which it serves as a go-between between the subject and the object. This subject-object relation is seen to constitute the fundament for knowledge. Regarding this relation, differing theories (empiricism, rationalism, positivism etc.) have different emphasizes in defining knowledge, but basically they all share the same fundament, a fundament that does not take into account how representations serve as intermediaries between subject and subject.

Whether we talk about knowledge or fact, they are both dependent on somebody being able to communicate them to somebody else. This relation is again not solely dependent on the photographs ability to be like nature. Because to determine what it is for something to be like something else, a shared standard is required. The shared standard does not exist as a given, it has to be constructed in our system of signs, in a language and in a lived life; in the actions and judgments of an agent. Lars Hertzberg writes:

The received view in Western philosophy is that knowledge, like understanding; involves something like a representation of reality. To know or understand something is for that representation to be in agreement with the facts. This agreement can be established to hold in a purely natural fashion, by a simple comparison between the person’s state and the facts. What I would like to argue is that this assumption is fundamentally misleading. There is no such thing as a neutral comparison between representations and facts. Whether or not a person’s ideas are adequate depends on the way they are expressed in her actions. Knowing or understanding something means having the appropriate relation to the facts of the matter. And this means that my assessments of another’s knowledge is not independent of the way I see her life.3

The fundamental point that Hertzberg brings to this discussion is that knowledge is not merely constituted in the relation that I have to the objective world, it is also formed through my relations to other people and my relation to others is not defined by correct (or incorrect) representations since to agree with another’s view on things is not a matter of correctness or incorrectness, but of trust, of sharing or unwillingness to share. The question that we have to address is: what does it mean for two people to see the same thing (or what does it mean for to people to disagree on what they see)? It can not simply mean that I and somebody else share the same visual impression. The notion of seeing runs deeper than this. Now one might think

that this means that images only represent objects as opposed to views, emotions, memories and experience, and therefore always fall short of what we could call knowledge in the more fundamental sense that Hertzberg advocates, as an understanding of other persons. But, on the contrary without its ability to communicate something between two subjects, the image will be meaningless. And without being able to communicate something beyond mere facts, images could not carry the role they have in our culture. This is what I addressed as the cultivation of the visual field in the last chapter. The task of making images, even in the case of photography, is a form of bringing forth, paying attention, of judging, of conditioning and also of forgetting, diminishing and of indoctrinating. This task, although it on occasions might strive towards neutrality, can not be a neutral matter.

See Mary ann Doane: indexicality trace and sign, p. 2-3.

The Steerage

In order to put this discussion about images as a view from in-between subjects into a context, let me bring in an example that hopefully puts into perspective the question of photographic meaning. Alfred Stieglitz’ photograph The Steerage came about when he was travelling in Europe on a ship in 1907 and felt a strong unease about the division between the first and second class passengers. This feeling manifested itself urgently in a certain view, Stieglitz writes: “Could I photograph what I felt, looking and looking and still looking? I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.”

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In *The Steerage*, Stieglitz expresses his experience through photography. He does not only want to mediate *what* he saw, what objects, shapes etc. he encountered, but *how* he saw, how the view revealed something about his experience of life. The understanding of the structures of a society that divides people into different classes, etc. is what the view meant for him. This is not an objective fact. It is an understanding of the state of things that goes beyond *mere* fact. He writes:

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men the women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. *I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people. . . . I saw shapes related to each other, I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put*
down this seemingly new vision that held me – people, the common people, the feeling the ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich – Rembrandt came to my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling.\(^5\)

Stieglitz description is significant in a historical context, since he writes and photographs in a time-period during which photography is still considered to be something less than art. His efforts have to be seen as strife to make photography into a proper art-form. To enable it to transcend mere copying of the natural world and to express emotion, judgment and understanding. The example of Stieglitz *The Steerage* brings this aspect of subjective experience back into the discourse on photography. The unease that Stieglitz felt when he discovers the social division that the first and second class deck signifies on the ship, is a reaction upon certain peoples’ predicaments, but also a reaction on his own position among the first class travelers. He feels alienated from the rich and sees the second class travelers as more authentic and more free. This is the role of the image that Stieglitz wanted to achieve in his photographs; he wanted to enable the photograph to communicate his feelings and experience of life. For a long time it was unclear how to get the camera to do this, because its’ commitment was elsewhere. Stieglitz writes:

> I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally I released the shutter. My heart thumping, I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached, related to the milestone of my ‘Car Horses’ made in 1892, and my ‘Hand of Man’ made in 1902, which had opened up a new era of photography, of seeing. In a sense it would go beyond them, for here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.\(^5\)

The problem however is that whatever Stieglitz claims that the photograph actually represents (“the feeling I had about life”), it does not necessarily correlate with the actual photograph in a straightforward way. There is a lapse on a factual level. When Stieglitz describes the view he wants to capture, he states that “only men were on the upper deck”, whereas in the actual photograph there are at least three women and a child on the upper deck.

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(on the far right). In this way it seems as if the photograph is more trustworthy than a written description. In the photograph there are women on the upper deck despite of what Stieglitz writes about the scene. His ideal view of what he wanted to capture is then different from the actual photograph. This also entails that the photograph, due to its indexicality, does not carry the idea or the sentiment present in Stieglitz written description of the view, in an equivalent way. The visual does not yield to Stieglitz sentiments. This kind of example usually serves as justification of the understanding of the photograph as indexical. However, in this case the three women on the upper deck point towards indexicality because the statement that Stieglitz makes concerning the view, stands in contrast to the photograph. This juxtaposition between text and image is the context in which the photograph becomes an indexical record. The photograph shows what Stieglitz, perhaps failed to pay attention to, and due to this it also captures un-intentional features in the scene. We could say that Stieglitz was more engaged with feelings and the autobiographical than he was with the visual.

In order to make this point clearer let me bring in another example. One of the philosophical arguments for the indexicality of photography that has perhaps had the strongest impact in the theory of photography is brought forth by Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*. Throughout the book, Barthes brings up clear examples of how photographs can carry details of what he calls “the very raw material of ethnological knowledge” (p. 28). As a caption to William Klein’s photograph *Mayday, Moscow, 1959*, Barthes writes: “The photographer teaches me how the Russians dress: I note a boy’s big cloth cap, another’s necktie, an old woman’s scarf around her head, a youth’s haircut …” (p. 29).

William Klein: Mayday, Moscow, 1959

Barthes continues: “I can enter still further into such details, observing that many of the men photographed by Nadar have long fingernails: an ethnographic question: How long were nails
worn in a certain period? Photography can tell me this much better than portraits:” (p. 30)

There is something inevitably correct in Barthes observation. A painter has to create every single detail on the canvas with his brush, whereas the automatic camera can capture details that are perhaps minute or elusive without any effort. He also points out how the difference between written descriptions and photographs becomes evident in the example of Klein’s photograph. The photograph seems to exceed a written account since it can actually show the types of dresses worn, the qualities of the fabric, the styles of the haircuts etc., etc., But if we read Barthes statement closely there is something that strikes a discord when he claims that “photography can tell me this much better”. It is not the photograph that tells us that the view is from Moscow, that it is taken in the year 1959, that the people depicted are Russian, that it is mayday. In other words if we claim that the photograph is indexical, it does not carry the information of what it is an index for, by itself. Therefore the caption is needed to concentrate our attention on, for example how Russians dress. Again it is in the context of the caption that the details become meaningful and our attention finds the significant qualities in the picture. What the photograph tells us is then dependent on what the photographer wants us to pay attention to and also on what the viewer brings to the photograph, which questions, interpretations and judgments are present when he is viewing the picture.

Now if we set the factual discrepancy aside, there is still a possible gap between what the photograph means and what Stieglitz proposes. Again, in order for me to understand the photograph in the same way as Stieglitz understands the view in front of him on the deck of a ship in 1907, we have to see the same thing. Obviously this can not be the case since I see a photograph whereas Stieglitz views an actual scene unfolding in his lived life. There is then a certain naivety in Stieglitz proposition. He believes that the view in front of him is somehow universal, that a photographic representation of the view would evoke the same emotional response in any viewer. As if the objects, shapes and gestures depicted would be the cause of the feeling he has and that this feeling could be evoked in each and every one of us by viewing a photograph of the scene (see Evans on Minor White p. 233 and Sekula p. 101). This kind of belief is often present in discourses on photography. As a medium it evokes understandings of a direct correspondence between representation and object, as if photography would be natural form of depiction. Whereas the early pioneers of photography and the scientists that used the camera as a recording instrument talked about the photographic image as an indexical trace made by nature herself, Stieglitz does not advocate a correspondence between natural facts and knowledge, but of emotions and natural facts. Stieglitz grasps onto the idea of correspondence and is in this way still stuck with a fixed
epistemological framework in which emotions and experience stem from natural shapes and objects, rather than from interactions with other people. The problem is the whole idea of this kind of straightforward correspondence between the natural world and the observer that sidesteps the influence of the understanding of other people. And when one claims that this correspondence can be transferred to photography, yet another problem occurs. As Donald Evans points out: “In art the natural objects which serve as correspondences are replaced by manufactured ones. We create rather than select correlates to our inner experience.” (p. 236).