

From the Other Half to the Down and Out: Reflections on Poverty in the Documentary Mode

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how poverty is negotiated in the documentary mode. By scrutinizing two HBO documentaries, *Down and Out in America* (1985) and *American Winter* (2013) in the light of the work of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, I argue that there is a continuous disparity between those who represent and those who are being represented. I will exemplify how this imbalance is facilitated through visual rhetoric and narrative form in documentary representations of poverty.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Documentary, Photography, Television

“This is for the people who are still down and out in America.”

Lee Grant, accepting an Academy Award for Best Documentary

Introduction

In his book *Vanishing Moments* Eric Schocket argues that “we find class not in what is revealed [...] but, rather, in the operations of revelation. Class does not refer to the objects within the visual frame; it refers to the act of framing, to a set of social relations and ideological processes through which these objects come into significance in the first place” (11). These operations of revelation turn most (if not all) representations of poverty into “cross-class representations” (Schocket xii), inevitably involving different ways of looking and being looked at across social boundaries. We can see this at play in poverty portraiture where “the social divide and distance between the two subjectivities is perhaps even more pronounced” (Lemke 100) than in other forms of photography.

At the turn of the century, the social reformers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine developed an original visual rhetoric as they combined social criticism with the persuasive potential of photography. Their visually pioneering works offer valuable insight into how the issue of poverty was ‘revealed’ in America more than a century ago. To this day the images function as intriguing reference points for understanding how poverty is represented in documentary imagery and how beliefs about the cause of poverty oscillate between individual and

systemic tendencies. In their role as “most distinguished proponents” of “documentary as an *approach* to representing reality for social (and, specifically, melioristic) purposes” (Böger 144), Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine built a unique foundation for some reflections on poverty in the documentary mode and their work serves as an interesting vantage point from which to scrutinize contemporary television documentaries about financial hardship such as HBO’s *Down and Out in America* (1985) and *American Winter* (2013).

As stated by Birte Christ, “the hierarchical relationship between those being represented and those doing the representing that is based in material inequality [...] is a dynamic that shapes accounts of poverty” (37). Accordingly, visual accounts feature an imbalance between the depicted domains of deprivation and the producers of these depictions. I argue that this central impasse of cross-class contact unites representations of poverty across time and media for it is evident both in photographic imagery of the Gilded Age and HBO documentaries about underprivileged Americans in what has come to be known as the New Gilded Age.

The Fathers of Social Documentary

In 1887 Jacob Riis, a Danish-born journalist working as a police reporter in New York City, learned about a seminal discovery: A chemist in Germany had invented flash powder. For the first time it was possible to produce photographic images in the dark at an unprecedentedly high shutter speed. Having investigated the squalid living conditions in Lower East Side tenements for some time, this was just the kind of innovation that Riis had been waiting for (Riis, *Making of an American* 172). He hired an amateur photographer before he eventually familiarized himself with the basics of photography and began exploring the tenement districts of Lower Manhattan, “bent on letting in the light where it was so much needed” (Riis, *Making* 173). At times he would just walk into tenement buildings in the small hours of the morning, and surprise residents with a blinding burst of light before disappearing again. Years later he recounts this practice in his autobiography:

There were cars on the Bowery, but I liked to walk, for so I saw the slum when off its guard. The instinct to pose is as strong there as it is on Fifth Avenue. It is a human impulse, I suppose. We all like to be thought well off by our fellows. But at 3 A.M. the veneering is off and you see the true grain of the thing. (152)

What Riis saw as the “true grain of the thing” were crowded apartments in dilapidated buildings, miserable expressions on poor peoples’ faces and filthy alleys, neglected by city officials. In accordance with his documentary approach, most of Riis’s images are long shots, providing the viewer with a thorough sense of the subjects’ living conditions.

Riis soon decided to have glass lantern slides made from his photographs and for the next two years he traveled around the East Coast to churches and YMCAs, presenting his snapshots of “The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New York” in stereopticon exhibitions (Czitrom 86). By way of projecting the images on wide screens, using music to dramatize the presentation and adopting the persona of a tour guide, who leads his middle-class audience through the streets and alleys of Manhattan, Riis offered what Gregory Jackson calls “virtual-tour narratives” (127). He provided entertaining anecdotes of how he got his pictures and deployed conventions of both reporting and preaching. When Riis gave his presentation in 1888, a local newspaper noted that, “it was unanimously agreed by the large and appreciative audience that the entertainment provided for them had proved most excellent” and that the audience “took a serious and sympathetic interest in the gloomy picture which he presented. The stereopticon views [...] gave his hearers a realistic assurance of the existence of such dens of infamy as few had ever suspected” (qtd. in Czitrom 88).¹ The spectacle of misery seemed to cater to the audience’s curiosity and the general desire for novelty.

In his book *The Virtues of the Vicious* Keith Gandal claims that the turn-of-the century slum was “both a danger zone that provides opportunities for adventure and heroism, like the West and the battlefield, and a separate culture, like the Orient or medieval France, whose unrefined or more ‘primitive’ virtues offer a tonic for a tired middle-class society” (21). Riis’s illustrated lectures allowed audiences to explore urban poverty and convert social awareness into a form of personal experience that remained detached from any fears inherent to first-hand encounters in real life. The subject matter evoked much fascination and functioned as a canvas for the audience’s imagination. The images themselves were

¹ Sieglinde Lemke points out that “[b]y visually emphasizing depravity” representations of the poor can “evoke fear or disgust in the (middle class) viewer” (101). She further explains that “[n]o empirical studies on the reception of poverty portraiture exist, but on a very general level it is fair to argue that even well-intentioned representations of poverty can, unwillingly, turn into negative representations” (101).

used to steer this imagination in a specific direction. As American Studies scholar Maren Stange notes, “the lectures embedded the evidentiary image in an elaborate discourse offering simultaneous entertainment and ideology, and from this the photograph, no matter how seemingly straightforward its reference, never stood apart” (2). Riis directed the viewers’ attention and assigned specific meanings congruent with his larger text by means of rhetorical and narrative strategies. In Washington, for instance, where his lecture was preceded by prayer, scripture reading, and organ music, he arranged his slides in a specific way as if to portray the life of homeless boys from their childhood to their burial in an unmarked grave (Stange 13). Stange further reconstructs the characteristic dynamics of Riis’s slide exhibitions:

Riis’s actual physical presence as mediator between the audience and the photographs virtually embodies the overseeing ‘master’ narrator familiar to readers of realist literature. Not only were the pleasures of reading recalled, but also the ostensibly incontrovertible authority of such a ‘point of view’ was evoked on Riis’s behalf, dismissing any possibility that the photograph itself might offer an alternative, or even oppositional, meaning to his. (14)

Additionally, by classifying the subjects of his images as *the Other Half*, Riis made his audience stand on his side of the equation by default; they could inhabit a safe and collective point of view from which to regard the dire conditions. In his photographs, Riis recorded neglected spaces and their lost potential. Oftentimes, material dimensions were emphasized by referring to the place where the image was taken, whereas individual information about subjects in the frame was left out. In 1890 Riis would compile some of the images in his highly controversial treatise *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. W. J. T. Mitchell notes that, while Riis generally assumed “a straightforward exchange of information between text and image” (287), his photographic essay features text as an “‘invasive’ and even domineering element” (286). For Riis, photography was an ancillary to his writing; the photographs created a spectacle to draw the reader in, while the text constituted the substance proper.

The sociologist Lewis Hine, on the other hand, was convinced of the power inherent in the image itself: “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera” (qtd. in Stott 30). Working as a staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) between 1908 and 1924, Hine took his camera across Progressive-Era America to gather life

stories of child laborers in a wide range of low-paying occupations. Hine's images attested to the pervasiveness of the issue of child labor like no contemporary newspaper article or scholarly essay did. Still, Hine wrote descriptive captions for each photograph, coining the term 'photo-story,' and he acknowledged that the documentary mode would always result in the struggle to authenticate each image and to generate its meaning through text, caption, and context. He also pursued reformatory objectives with his photographic work. Since many people had to be reached in order to get meliorative action under way, Hine, too, used his photographs in the form of lantern slides for public lectures in an effort to bring about legislation regulating child labor. According to Russell Freedman, the NCLC lent sets of the slides to local groups and organizations along with a ready-made talk and Hine himself lectured on the problem of child labor whenever the committee delegated him (72). The poor children's faces loomed larger-than-life and bright in the dark auditoriums while Hine described the hardships they had to endure. Freedman quotes a newspaper reporter who, after having witnessed an exhibit of Hine's photographs curated by the NCLC in Alabama, proclaimed:

There has been no more convincing proof of the absolute necessity of child labor laws [...] than these pictures showing the suffering, the degradation, the immoral influence, the utter lack of anything that is wholesome in the lives of these poor little wage earners. They speak far more eloquently than any [written] work—and depict a state of affairs which is terrible in its reality—terrible to encounter, terrible to admit that such things exist in civilized communities. (72)

In his assemblage of photographic images and text titled "Making Human Junk" from 1914 for instance, Hine not only presents "a self-contained visual argument about the evils of child labor" (Finnegan 260) but also points to broader issues as he makes "a summative statement on the relationship between child labor and the health of the nation" (Finnegan 260). Composed to follow the argument from top to bottom, the montage creates a narrative, telling the story of how little boys and girls—"good material" (Hine)—enter the nation's factories just like actual raw material would, undergo an unspecified "process" (Hine) and come out as fatigued, grim-faced children without future prospects: "the products" of industrial child labor or "human junk" (Hine). The concluding question "Shall Industry be allowed to put this cost on Society?" (Hine) emphasizes the social cost argument Hine tries to convey in most of his work and the rhetorical potency the piece must have

exhibited for middle class audiences. Both Riis and Hine solidified the disparity between the milieus of poverty they sought to represent and their own social position as outside observers.

Postclassical Documentaries on Poverty

The mode of documentary film has at least two idiosyncratic features that are crucial for analyzing representations of poverty. First, documentary film has long been established as a medium that exposes knowledge of what is constructed as ‘real’ founded on the preexistence and the preservation of the profilmic event. According to theorist Bill Nichols, this knowledge, especially in the expository documentary mode, is “epistemic [...] in Foucault’s sense” as it is “in compliance with the categories and concepts accepted as given or true in a specific time and place [...]” (35). The documentary mode aligns itself with what Nichols calls “epistophilia” (31), a pleasure in knowing, and in order to express, transmit, and acquire knowledge documentaries make use of various narrative strategies. Second, documentary filmmaking—as opposed to constructing a fiction film—revolves around developing a main argument. The documentary form is laid out to be persuasive and it hinges on the ability to transfer an impression of authenticity. When applied to representations of poverty, these two presuppositions—generating knowledge and developing an argument—pave the way for the viewer’s position outside of the realm of what is represented on screen. Poverty is something that is allegedly unknown to the viewers, something they have yet to gain knowledge about, and the social obligation to help alleviate it is something they have to be persuaded of.

Classic documentaries often use a voice-of-God narrator, exhibit a conceptually oriented structure and present a closed argumentation, unambiguous in its meaning. The putative opposite, direct cinema, “focuses on the experiential dimension to provoke the spectatorial impression of being present at the profilmic event” (Cagle 50). The argumentation is open, ambiguous, and implied rather than explicit. However, the documentary mode is inherently prone to change. Over the last decades, many documentary filmmakers have generated new definitions of authenticity that avoid the compliance with what André Bazin would refer to as immediate “transference of reality” (8) in favor of multilateral notions of exchange between social actors, filmmakers, and viewers. Consequently, many new documentaries

feature a “postclassical” form of narration, which—according to Chris Cagle—“combines elements of classical and direct-cinema narration. Its structure and argumentation suggest the openness of direct cinema without relinquishing the clarity of classical documentary” (54). In fact, postclassical documentaries engender hybrid forms of expository and observational filmmaking and hence diligently involve topics of high diversity as well as complexity, such as social class.

Broadcast almost thirty years apart from each other, both *Down and Out in America* and *American Winter* were produced by Sheila Nevins, the ‘founding mother’ of HBO’s documentary unit, which was established in the late 1970s, and therefore the person most responsible for developing documentaries at the cable network. Nevins is known for having pushed documentaries to popularity at a time when there was no high profile for such programs on television. For the “Home Box Office,” trying to broaden its subscriber base and to reach upscale viewers, documentaries have always constituted a valuable feature. HBO documentaries are known for their “visceral examinations of human culture” (Mascaro 244) as they are “less restricted than basic cable channels and especially broadcasters in terms of language and visual content” (244). They focus on personal narratives as well as controversial topics and seem to deliberately invite the viewer’s sympathetic gaze.

Down and Out in America

In January 1980 the U.S. economy entered a downturn that, at the time, was the most severe recession of the post-war era. Business bankruptcies increased dramatically and the crippling economic situation resulted in a full-fledged farm crisis, as agricultural exports declined, crop prices fell, and interest rates rose. At the dawn of what would become the New Gilded Age unemployment rates rocketed, income inequality grew and social mobility decreased.² Lee Grant’s 1985 film *Down and Out in America*, which became the first cable program to win an Academy Award, chronicles the lives of citizens hit by the recession and its long-felt repercussions. Grant, who is not only the directing but also the narrating voice of the film, begins with the introduction of the eponymous down and out:

² For further information cf. Barnett and United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These are the down and out. Familiar images of displaced people on our streets, far removed from our lives. Most of us feel we could never end up like this, yet some of us do. [...] These people were riding high on the American Dream. They had homes and jobs and hopes for the future. Suddenly the bottom has dropped out of their world and they are down and out in America.

The introductory sentences open up a noteworthy similarity to the concept of the Other Half evoked by Jacob Riis. However, Lee Grant does not represent the poor as being a definable part of an equation but as being entirely cut out of said equation, not even standing on the sidelines of society. Words such as “displaced” and “removed” emphasize the isolated position and utter societal placelessness of the subjects, while at the same time the narrator demarcates the audience’s and her own position by way of referring to “our lives” and “most of us.” Visually, these self-reflexive traces of social asymmetries are edited against “familiar images” as alluded to by the filmmaker: ragged figures sitting on the sidewalk, sleeping on park benches, cleaning their plates in public drinking fountains. Alternating between medium distance and close distance to the subjects, the camera incorporates and stresses the public surroundings and, in turn, universalizes the environment and creates intensity.

The film follows a three-part structure, each part being dedicated to different sectors of American society: a group of heartland farmers foreclosed on by the bank, a grassroots homeless coalition defeated by landowners in Los Angeles, and a family of six living in a squalid welfare hotel in New York after having lost their home to a fire. The film offers no explicit connection between the groups but rather lets financial distress serve as an overarching narrative thread. The filmmaker draws on both intellectual montage of classical documentary and the real-time aesthetics of direct cinema to transmit knowledge about the lives of the disadvantaged.

Frequently used in various forms of documentary, interviews function as staple situations with great structural and mediatory significance. Exploiting polyvalence and potential affective responses to audio-visual recordings, television interviews enable the sympathetic gaze of the viewer while establishing preconceived power relations. The ‘talking heads’ interview snippets at the beginning of *Down and Out in America* are additionally used as a narrative strategy in that they mark a disturbance to the status quo. Former members of the middle class, respectable citizens with jobs, good credit ratings and college education have fallen into poverty. A woman explains, “I was one of the people that thought that welfare

was something that you could do without. I was working, I had a college degree, I had it made [...].” The interview snippets are bridged with images of abandoned factory buildings and farmhouses. In lieu of using continuity editing, which would evoke the sense of a coherent spatio-temporal flow, the editing is evidentiary in order to present one unified, convincing argument. One of the farmers, who will be introduced as Bobbie Paulsen later in the documentary, voices her concern while images of seemingly abandoned farmhouses occupy the screen: “I don’t know where the people are going. I’m quite afraid that they’ll end up sleeping in culverts and under bridges and living in tents in the ditch like they did in the thirties.” The form of rhetorical coherence that is established relies on cause and effect rather than time and space and, paradoxically, the fragmentation of raw footage is necessary to create a sense of argumentative continuity. Especially in the attempt to represent a frayed social safety net, the interviews function like witness accounts put forward in court for the ‘jury’ of middle class viewers to be persuaded of the problem’s existence. Had *Down and Out in America* been entirely observational in the tradition of direct cinema, i.e. had the struggling farmers and urban homeless merely been observed over a prolonged period of time by means of the fly-on-the-wall technique, the audience’s potential path from abstract knowledge to personal experience may have been less conceivable. On the one hand, the whole documentary is leavened with interviews and rather long monologues on the part of the subjects. On the other hand, explanatory voice-over-commentaries of the narrator are frequently provided as well. They are carefully arranged in order to promote the argumentation and constantly address the viewer by means of what Nichols calls a “see-it-my-way” perspective (126). Lee Grant’s voice-over commentaries anchor the images and provide semantic firmness with regard to the issue of hardship, with which many spectators are allegedly unfamiliar.

In an interview Lee Grant alluded to her incentive for making the documentary: “*Down and Out in America* [...] said everything that I ever wanted to say about what the Reagan years did to this country” (qtd. in Seger 96). The logic that pervades her documentary is based on a rather simple constituting argument: The harsh realities of Reaganomics caused the collapse of the nation’s social and economic system and the United States cannot afford to leave behind those most affected by this collapse. Nonetheless, by exhibiting a relatively loose style, the film expedites the notion of capturing a glimpse of precariousness as it is and the

argument only arises by insinuation. *Down and Out in America* is rhetorically powerful precisely because it manages to conceal, at least in part, its own rhetoricity as well as the social imbalance between filmmaker and subjects.

American Winter

In the 21st century, indigence remains a very real problem for over 45 million (that is 14.5% of all) American citizens who live below the official poverty line (United States Census Bureau).³ The documentary *American Winter*, which first aired on HBO in March 2013, follows the personal stories of eight families in Portland, Oregon, all of which were financially stable until the Great Recession forced them into experiencing extensive financial insecurity.

The opening shots of the documentary activate connotations of coldness, misery, and adversity already initiated by its title: a leaden sky, thunder rumbling in the distance, a bleak atmosphere of deserted streets lined with gray snow slush and rusty mailboxes. The voice of a woman intones over the image of a small white bungalow with a half-finished front porch and a soaked couch on the front lawn: “I get a text from my husband while I’m at work, saying PGE [Pacific Gas and Electric Company] is here to shut us off.” The ensuing account of the experience of financial hardship in winter is provided by the couple and two of their children who voice their feelings about the situation. “With no lights it was hard to get around the house and since there was no electricity we couldn’t cook our food. [...] It was so cold [...]. It was really scary.” The remarks uttered by the subjects are interwoven with supplementary shots, featuring beautiful yet static images of snow and ice, reminiscent of landscape photography. The documentary oscillates between a universal outside world that likely is familiar to the viewer and the glimpse inside the unknown, the unveiling of how poor families manage to persevere. It is not a new technique, in fact it has become fairly common to conceptualize the financial crisis as ‘winter.’ The central metaphor that uses winter as source domain and the Great Recession as target domain insinuates the need to take precautions to survive. While viewers find themselves in comfortably warm living rooms, fellow Americans struggle to make it through the harsh season. Reverberating with

³ Referring to the year 2013. Recent numbers will be issued in the late summer of 2015.

naturalistic approaches to poverty, the documentary's narrative arc adheres to the temporal continuity and inevitability of the seasons. *American Winter* starts in medias res, introducing the individual battles each family has to fight on an everyday basis. When most of them experience even more severe crises in the second part (one father gets laid off, another gets foreclosed on, a widowed single mother has to resort to sleeping in a homeless shelter with her sick son) the documentary positions the subjects in the dead of winter. After having overcome the most dire straits through the assistance of social service workers, however, the families seem to be recovering again as the narrative resolution coincides with the budding of spring.

Even though the problem of economic struggle lies at the core of the documentary, *American Winter* is character-driven rather than issue-oriented. Contradictory though it may seem in the realm of non-fiction, the centralization of characters has developed into a firm element of the postclassical narrational system and many documentaries approach broad issues through their subjects. "For character-driven documentaries [...] the narrative arc centers on the social actor's experience [...]. Narrativizing the social actor provides spectatorial identification for what otherwise might be an abstract issue" (56), Chris Cagle writes. Spectatorial identification is essential to the social documentary mode. However, it does not automatically result in equalization since it can hardly be more than monodirectional acknowledgement.

The absence of a narrator or an authoritarian voice-of-God commentary in *American Winter* is evocative of the claim to unmediated truthfulness. Yet, the absence is absorbed by the social actors' verbal pronouncements and corresponding visual renditions, which function as a less overt version of narration. The visual rhetoric slowly builds up to the title as newspaper clippings glide over the screen; headlines about the economic crisis, poverty rates, food insecurity and child homelessness come into focus and fade out again. The clippings interrupt the diegetic reality of the documentary and remind the audience of the broader context beyond the Portland homes opened up for their gaze. At the same time, the viewer encounters a suggestion of cause and effect similar to the evidentiary editing used in *Down and Out in America*: The personal stories stand in direct correlation with the images or vice versa. The piano- and string-based music sets the slow pace appropriate for

contemplating the impersonal content while at the same time harking back to the subjective level through its emotional coloring. The instrumental theme twines and evolves throughout the documentary, echoing the central metaphorical use of winter slowly yet inevitably turning into spring.

Over the course of one hour, the documentary repeatedly resorts to stressing the problem of poverty in all its pervasiveness, thus time and again removing the viewer from the subjectivity of the poverty-stricken. The filmmakers combine the experiences made by the distressed families with interview snippets of local economic experts, policy analysts, religious leaders, and social workers, i.e. people who presumably reside on similar levels in the perceived social hierarchy as the viewer. Images of random houses advertised for sale or forlorn winter streets and poignant anonymous sound bites taken from Portland's 211 social service hotline are interspersed as well. The documentary threads a web of knowledge based on subjective as well as supposedly objective features of poverty. Consequently, the argumentation is rather closed, displaying hardly any moments of ambiguity. *American Winter* approaches objective narration through the subjective and emotionalizes the issue of financial hardship. It, too, conceals its rhetoricity to some extent in order not to destabilize its epistemic authority. In an interview Harry Gantz elaborates on the fact that *American Winter* qualifies as cross-class representation:

Our intention is to take the notoriety that the HBO screenings give us and take it to screenings in theaters, union halls, churches with different organizations throughout the country who feel it's important to work with several non-profits; we've already gotten several advocacy groups, union groups who want to do screenings in their communities throughout the country, because, you know, there's a lot of people who don't have HBO, especially the people who are most affected by this and we think it's important that the film start a movement with other films and other organizations. Every congressman, every senator has lobbyists knocking at their door, trying to get their special interests across [...] and these folks don't have a lobbyist and that's what this film is doing – giving a voice to these people who are the most affected by this Great Recession and have the least voice. (Gantz)

The self-reflexive awareness of the imbalance of power in the representation of poverty and the creation of new channels through which the documentary is perceived can be read as the filmmakers' attempt to reduce the divide and avoid the construction of the poor subjects as the Other. The act of "giving a voice to these people" (Gantz) however, ultimately

solidifies the lopsided power relation between those who represent and those who are being represented.

Closing Remarks

Social documentary—in its photographic as well as televisual implementations—presupposes questions that have been asked time and again, such as ‘Why should the U.S. spend limited public resources to reduce poverty?’ and they seem to offer three threads of argumentation. First, they argue on moral grounds. Like Jacob Riis in his slide exhibitions, the television films emotionalize the issue and suggest that the alleviation—or at least reduction—of poverty is right and just and charitable. They emblemize the communal rewards of prompt intervention (*American Winter*) as well as otherwise dismal repercussions (*Down and Out in America*). Second, they focus on economic reasons, already ascertainable in Lewis Hine’s “Making Human Junk.” Here, the burden of poverty is narrativized in order to convey how it deprives society of some of its productive potential. The viewer is supposed to recognize that the social costs of poverty are high and that its reduction may be in the nation’s material self-interest. Last but not least, the potent visual rhetoric personalizes poverty as a complex condition that is a possible threat to the middle class. The television documentaries follow all three lines of argumentation, thus achieving a rather powerful combination of the appeal to social obligation, economic reasoning as well as viewer identification. The argumentation is based on social inequalities to the paradoxical effect that documentary representations of poverty depend on their central predicament in order to work.

Gregory Jackson, who reads Jacob Riis’s work as homiletic, observes that they “denied readers the role of passive onlooker, presenting instead a virtual reality that demanded their narrative participation and volition in moral choices. These texts required the viewing-auditor to identify with the subjects, to engage in a dialogue about not only his or her decisions and choices but also their implications for personal experience and social obligation” (131). The documentaries by Lee Grant and Harry and Joe Gantz follow in this path by attempting to draw their viewership in. Just as Riis and Hine however, they fail to leave the predicament of unequal power relations behind. One of the remnants of the works

discussed above is the immanent notion that the consumers of images of poverty inhabit a different social sphere than the subjects whose accounts are represented.

The aim of this article was to provide some reflections on the continuous imbalance of power in cross-class documentary representations. While further research is certainly needed to examine the operations of revelation in poverty imagery, this article has exemplified how visual rhetoric and narrative form contribute to the framing of the underprivileged.

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