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Gilded Age Visual Media as the Impetus for Social Change: Jacob Riis's Reform Photography and the Antecedents of Documentary Film

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GILDED AGE VISUAL MEDIA AS THE IMPETUS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE:
JACOB RIIS'S REFORM PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ANTECEDENTS
OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

By

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Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Gilded Age Visual Media as the Impetus for Social Change:

Jacob Riis's Reform Photography and the Antecedents of Documentary Film

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This thesis examines the birth and evolution of the social documentary genre in visual media. It proposes that a mixture of ideology, technology, and social awareness are necessary for a successful social reform. Its review and study of related primary and secondary sources determines that despite the limitations of technology during the nineteenth century, social documentaries were produced long before they were part of the genres of photography and film. By focusing on the work of Danish photographer Jacob Riis and tracing the emergence of the film medium through time, this thesis demonstrates a strong connection between documentary film and Riis's social documentary photography and public slide exhibitions. The thesis supports the idea that in order to understand the present, one must study the past, and in these terms, Riis's work should be viewed as one of the chief precursors of the social documentary genre in visual media. Ultimately, the thesis determines the importance of the role of visual documentary in society, the idea that it anchors historical and collective memory, and its history is still relevant to the twenty-first century.

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PREFACE

Many graduate students face the dilemma of what to write about in their thesis and I was no exception. While I knew I would be focusing on journalism and media, since this was my major, I had no idea of precisely what aspect of the field I should delve into in order to make a meaningful contribution to already existing scholarship. It did not take very long however to realize that no matter what I wrote about, I had to do so with passion and dedication.

Since I have always had personal interest in photography myself, it was only natural for me to take this path. My research for this thesis began with a broad overview of photography and social reform, moreover how the former can inspire the latter. Then, during my second semester as a graduate student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I took a History of Journalism class with Dr. Gregory Borchard and he introduced me to a very colorful historical character with whom I felt I had a lot in common — Danish immigrant Jacob Riis.

Like me, Riis had immigrated to America in search for the American Dream. He found it in helping change society through his work. Although he worked as a journalist, he is primarily known for his reform photography and muckraking work during the Gilded Age. While looking at his work from journalistic and artistic perspectives can suffice to demonstrate his success, I felt the fact that scholars have mainly focused on those aspects was not enough to convey his contributions to society and media as a whole. His work is multidimensional and demonstrates how the journalistic profession

can be viewed from many different, yet related, perspectives — sociological, artistic, and political. Riis's achievements were both innovative and revolutionary and they have inspired future generations of journalists and visual documentarians on many levels.

Finally, my study discusses the significance of creating credible images of society and the effective framing of personal observations in order to create social awareness.

What intrigued me about this aspect of Riis's work is the question whether such approach, whether journalistic or not, can be as effective in today's highly visual world.

Yet my interest in surveying the impact of Riis's efforts in influencing the social documentary genre in visual media also comes from the desire to learn more about the journalistic value of his work and its role in mass media and society in a time of massive technological growth. His time in history is very similar to what we all experience today.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the historical significance and authenticity of activist-photographer Jacob Riis's nineteenth-century social documentary is essential in identifying the influence of documentary visual media on society as a whole. The essence of the photographic image, as a document, lies precisely in its power to take audiences back to the historical world — to a unique point in time that can never be replicated — and surveying Riis's work provides that exact reference point necessary to highlight the perpetual power of the social documentary. By the late 1800s, photographs had already enchanted media consumers in parts of the world with a popular press that featured woodcut reproductions of photographs in newspapers and magazines. At the same time, Riis began playing a key role in both the evolution of photography as a medium and the popularization of images for reporting, educational, and social awareness purposes.

Riis was among the Gilded Age's first and most prolific contributors to an emerging field of the investigative journalism known as muckraking, a term coined by Theodore Roosevelt. The progressive Republican president (1901-1909) had given a speech describing crusading journalists of the time who had written about social conditions from the point of view of objective observers (Chalmers, 1964). Riis's effective use of both written and spoken word, and even more so, of photography as a way to document social conditions in New York City, paved the way not only for investigative reporters to come, but influenced the social documentary genre in visual media, too.

In the late 1800s, during the turbulent times of the social reform in the country, Riis photographed the poor and disadvantaged living on the streets of the city's destitute Five Points. The area had become the central location for millions of newly arrived immigrants who faced enormous social and economic challenges. His powerful images not only served as the groundwork for his famous 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives* and led to the renovation of Mulberry Bend, one of the worst areas of the city, but they also set the stage for the development of the social documentary genre in visual media.

Due to the limitations of technology at the time, however, the reproduction of images in newspapers was still a laborious and expensive process, and most photographs did not reach wide circulation. Instead, reformers and educators alike used lantern slide projection devices in order to draw crowds into churches and schools. The careful sequencing of photographic images accompanied by powerful rhetoric "told" the story and helped the crowd to understand the issues at hand, just like the "moving pictures," or film, would in later decades.

The fields of documentary photography and photojournalism had already begun emerging only decades before with Mathew Brady's photographs of the American Civil War. With the help of a team of photographers, Brady produced emotionally charged images of the battlefield with a wet-plate process of production. He used a glass plate covered with flammable collodion solution that interacted with a strip of transparent film that became sensitive to light when dipped in a silver nitrate (Newcomer, 2006). He was an innovator and a leading photojournalist. His impact and the popularization of photography as a journalistic tool was noted in the 2013 monograph *From Realism to Reality: The Advent of War Photography*, by Borchard, Mullen, and Bates. "From the

leading illustrated newspapers *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, from lithographs and wood-cuts, and from Mathew Brady's public galleries," the authors wrote, "images not only provided a compelling sample of a major event in American history but also captured a pivotal moment in the development of media" (p.66).

Brady's photographers documented Bull Run, the first major battle of the war, and came up with the idea of creating a photographic history of the war (Borchard, Mullen & Bates, 2013). Realizing the impact images had on audiences, he singlehandedly took on the initiative to hire photographers who followed the troops in black wagons that stored glass plates, photographic equipment, and served as the darkroom for image processing (Sloan, 2008).

Brady's and other images used for documentary purposes during and after the Civil War had profound effects on audiences and signaled a monumental shift in communications that would become meaningful for the future (Goldberg, 1991). Documentary photography quickly grew as a field in the 1900s with the invention of the Kodak box camera and fast film, providing new opportunities for professionals to document the social effects of the Industrial Revolution. Shortly after, in the 1920s, the German innovator E. Leitz introduced the Leica camera allowing for even faster and better image production than ever before (Folkerts & Lacy, 2004).

As technology changed, so did the ways photographers produced and used images. More and more professionals and amateurs found ways to become involved in visually documenting society, as well as their own experiences. The greatest technological contribution in picture making in the late-nineteenth century was the perfection of the halftone printing plate (Newhall, 1982). These innovations, the

simplification of equipment, and the growing popularity of visual imagery paved the way for the next generation of social documentary photographers and filmmakers.

Background

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, post-Civil War America was faced with severe economic conditions that left unprecedented portions of the population struggling to survive. In the *Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, historian Alan Trachtenberg (1982) suggests that such events had triggered the notion of doubt at the very age of celebration of technological and industrial progress. Indeed, it was a time of economic growth, wealth accumulation, and massive urbanization, yet the Gilded Age was also wracked by persistent crises. Trachtenberg (1982) attributes the crisis to an international depression between 1873 and 1896 that afflicted all industrial nations with chronic overproduction and dramatically falling prices, averaging one-third on all commodities.

At the same time, new inventions and numerous technological innovations — from transportation to communication — mesmerized the citizenry. The growth of industrialization also triggered a westward expansion. The U.S. population grew from approximately 36 million in 1865 to almost 78 million by 1901. “Yet these widely dispersed people felt a part of a unified whole. A transcontinental railroad network brought farm and factory, county and town closer together. Telegraph and telephone, electricity and press increased public knowledge, business efficiency, and political debate” (Cashman, 1984).

The years of the Gilded Age not only heralded a colossal shift in the American society, but also came with new economic, employment, and housing challenges as many natives were on the move from rural to urban areas. Immigrants were facing the same circumstances that were in stark contrast with the notion of the American Dream and the “good” life they may have imagined. Among these immigrants was Jacob Riis. Born in Denmark, he journeyed to the United States in 1870 at age 21. The first several years of his journey into the New World were characterized with unemployment, starvation, and poverty in the New York slums. Although he sometimes found work as a carpenter or as a writer for small newspapers, he did not keep these jobs for very long and often found himself sleeping in police lodging houses — the typical “home” for immigrants and criminals. Riis was indeed among the many destitute who grew in numbers even more at the turn of the century as more than 35 percent of the population in New York and Chicago had immigrated to similarly terrible conditions (Kobre, 2008).

In 1878, Riis finally found steady employment as a reporter for *The New York Tribune*, an important reform paper at the time. There, he wrote firsthand accounts of the inequalities of immigrant and lower classes he faced for a few years himself. A pioneer muckraker, he was the perfect fit for the newspaper and its legendary founder, Horace Greeley. It was the perfect time for the rise of muckrakers and investigative reporters, too. Crusading writers who emerged in the muckraker movement at the turn of the century, such as David Graham Phillips, Ida M. Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Lincoln Steffens, just like Riis, were influenced by the tremendous economic changes during the Gilded Age and the effects of these changes on society.

At the *Tribune*, Riis was assigned the police beat allowing him to expose social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and unsanitary living conditions of crime-ridden areas such as Mulberry Bend in Lower Manhattan. It was not long before he realized however that words could not even begin to describe the reality he once faced and was continuing to witness, so he turned to photography (Goldberg, 1991).

He taught himself how to use a camera, and although photo aesthetics and artistry may not have been his trade, he cared deeply about the devastating living conditions of his fellow immigrants and hoped to depict them with his pictures. Riis was constantly seeking ways to expose social injustice while producing powerful documentary images of real people in real situations.

The photographer focused his early reform efforts on Mulberry Bend, one of the worst slums in the city, which housed more than a million people in 37,000 dark tenement buildings. Although his photographs did not interest newspapermen, Riis was able to gain supporters and lecture in front of groups and congregations, all of which allowed him to compile his materials into a book exposing the devastating living conditions in the tenements — *How the Other Half Lives* was born.

Due to the restrictions of technology at the time, his images required wood engravings or blurry halftones for mass production and subsequently failed to attract the attention of major publishers. Yet, despite the limitations of technology during the nineteenth century, photographers had already sensed the influential power of the image and the economic and social effects it comes with. In the early 1800s, a wave of technological developments in photography had triggered even more ideas about business and education with one of the early precursors of motion picture exhibition — the magic

lantern. The device was used to project images that were painted on glass plates using an oil lamp as a light source, which were often presented in a show format with a narrator, or a lecturer (Newcomer, 2006).

In his article *The Demise of the Magic Lantern Show*, Edward W. Schneider (2006) connects the technological “miracle” of the lantern to the first optical lenses used by scientists to develop microscopes and telescopes; “As the laws of optics became widely understood, people found amusing ways to apply them,” he writes. “The magic lantern was one of the first, and it remained popular from around 1685 to 1905. It was at first a parlor toy for the wealthy and then a tool for stage magicians (whence its name)” (Schneider, 2006). Later on, the invention of limelight further improved the apparatus by offering a better projection quality for audiences. Photographic slides were coupled with the device around 1850 and became widely available several years later. From 1840 to 1890, magic lanterns had all the characteristics the Gilded Age society would typically associate with “high technology.” “The apparatus was expensive, had three projecting lenses to dissolve from one image to the next, it required experience, skill, and great care to operate effectively, the state of the art was evolving rapidly,” writes Schneider (2006).

Riis also took advantage of such new developments in order to advance his reform efforts. He employed the magic lantern for all of his public showings since his work was not widely reproduced in newspapers — one of the most widespread mass mediums of the nineteenth century. His effective use of the device and his powerful rhetoric successfully set the stage for later developments in documentary moviemaking. The social circumstances of the era and the available technology at the time were the key

elements that made it possible for him to reach larger audiences and to advocate for social reform.

Riis's photographs, as published in his book *How the Other Half Lives* were remarkable, but the powerful slides projected on a large screen were more effective in reaching the audience. Riis had presented his lectures with every possible ounce of drama. He had spoken for hours, in dark auditoriums with a spotlight on him. He had displayed up to one hundred slides during a single lecture, piling horror upon horror on his audience. The reformer's up-to-the-minute equipment had projected the photographs in stereo vision for added depth and realism, and a dissolve mechanism had made one slide slip into the next as if slowly moving (Goldberg, 1991).

In *Making Argument Visible: The Magic Lantern Shows of Jacob A. Riis*, historian Eliza Butler (2008) notes that by using this new form of entertainment, Riis made his magic lantern performances relatable and persuasive, garnering support for changes in the conditions of the Five Points. "Riis's performances exerted a profound effect on [audiences'] way of seeing," Butler writes. "This new way of seeing came from Riis's ability to highlight the visual elements — a practice straight out of Protestant preaching — and in turn render argument visible" (p. 29).

Efforts to improve technology and recording motion have indeed been in the works years before the emergence of the magic lantern and photographic equipment Riis had used. Although photographic slides were not coupled with the device until after the 1850s, the artistic and technological breakthroughs at the end of the nineteenth century led to one of the most celebrated visual mediums at the start of the twentieth century — motion pictures. By this time, audiences had already been captivated with the "moving

photographs” displayed on a big screen with the help of sixteenth-century inventions such as the magic lanterns. The introduction of cinema in the 1870s was the triumph of visual media as it allowed for the production, packaging, and projection of complete shows rather than series of snippets sequenced by individual lecturers (Schneider, 2006).

Technology essentially enabled and revolutionized mass media. For many centuries, inventors and artists alike have been fascinated by the idea of capturing the world through light, manipulation of reality and later, moving pictures. Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography* explained that camera pictures in some respects have been made ever since the late Renaissance. “The principle of the camera had long been known: light entering a minute hole in the wall of a darkened room forms on the opposite side of the wall an inverted image of whatever lies outside,” Beaumont wrote. “The use of the *camera obscura* (literally ‘dark room’) for the production of pictures however was not realized until a century a later” (Newhall 1982).

The enchantment with the ability to capture reality with light and freeze a moment in time dictated the next technological progression period and camera and projection equipment began moving rapidly in the 1800s. While Joseph Nicéphore Niépce is credited to be among the chief inventors of camera equipment with his *pyreolphorer* in the early 1800s, during the 1830s Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre introduced the more effective *daguerreotype*, a variation of earlier photographic techniques that improved production methods. The process created highly detailed images, made on plates and developed through reactions of chemicals including silver, chloride, and mercury. Exposure times for the earliest daguerreotypes required anywhere between three and

fifteen minutes, making portraits impractical, but later advancements in technological capabilities reduced the exposure time to less than a minute (Newhall, 1982).

With the advance of various image reproduction devices, visuals had quickly become one of the main driving forces behind newspaper sales during an era in which media offered a well-established collection of influential photographic representations of current affairs, scientific discoveries, and public discourse to its consumers. The photograph — a piece of evidence, produced by the brief transaction between chemicals and light — was acknowledged as one of life’s most truthful “witnesses” (Goldberg, 1991). Moreover, the growth of photography was closely interrelated with historical developments, including telegraphy, railroads, and the postal service — innovations that revolutionized the nineteenth century. As media scholar Simone Natale (2012) notes, photography was informed by the dream of going beyond the limitations of space and distance. “Photography was conceived as a medium that put images in movement” (p. 452). It offered a new way of seeing the world. The early institutional development of film as part of media began precisely with photography and the idea that pictures could essentially appear to move when simultaneously projected on a screen.

Photographer Eadweard Muybridge is credited with being among the first to attempt to prove the idea that motion can indeed be captured and shown in a sequence so that it appears that the subject in the images is moving. Known as the winner of the famous horse bet, in 1872 he captured a moving horse on a racetrack demonstrating that all four of the horse’s hooves had left the ground simultaneously (Newcomer, 2006). “In an instant Muybridge’s photographs changed forever the concept of art as an intensely

personal vision to one that was a pursuit of realism, thus finding the truth in the tangible, instead of the private imagination” (Newcomer, 2006).

Further advances of technology provided a more realistic look into what the future of “moving pictures” would look like. In 1884, George Eastman, developed the first roll of film, replacing the heavy metal and glass plates used for making photos. In 1889, Hannibal Goodwin’s invention of celluloid — a transparent, flexible film coated with chemicals sensitive to light — enabled motion pictures to be created (Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2012). In the late 1800s, Thomas Edison introduced the *kinetoscope* popularizing public projections even further. The device was a small projection system allowing viewers to look through a hole and see images moving on a plate. In 1894, the first kinetoscope parlor, featuring two rows of coin-operated machines, opened on Broadway in New York (Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2012). The device and Edison took center stage in the history of the invention of motion pictures.

Although technology has had an undeniable impact on the progress, production, and distribution of visual documentaries, the shaping of the presentation and the nature of the content hold their place in the genre’s developmental history, too. During the late nineteenth century, both photographic slides and short films were typically projected on a big screen and accompanied by stories or rhetoric. Since visuals could not be reproduced as effectively in the printed press, until newsreels emerged, these “spectacles” were one of the few visual media devices used to reach audiences and to communicate current issues and events.

Newsreels from the late 1800s were also considered to be among the first short documentary films, marking the start of the documentary tradition. Scottish film producer

John Grierson inspired the term *documentary* and described it as being a “creative treatment of actuality,” or a genre that interprets reality by recording real people and settings” (Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2012). He provided a clear contrast between documentary and entertainment suggesting that such recording and interpretation of real problems and real situations offered a new instrument of public influence, promising, in Beaumont Newhall’s words, “to make drama of our daily lives and poetry from our problems” (Newhall, 1982).

Among the first documentary films were those of the Lumière brothers, who have arguably been credited with the invention of the *cinematograph* — a combined camera, film development and projection system, allowing many to see the moving images on a large screen. In a number of respects, the brothers set the stage for the beginning of the documentary film tradition as their short films focused on the reality of city life and provided reportage on real people. Films such as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *The Arrival of a Train* were true documentaries inasmuch as they were not staged or manipulated and followed actuality without disturbing its natural state. Such lifelikeness offered radical implications, in both photography and film, and suggested the existence of a new connection of pictures to time — the idea that the camera holds the unique ability to be at the actual scene at some precise moment in the past (Trachtenberg, 1989).

The 1900s however were truly the time when documentary officially came to full bloom. Instead of seeking to entertain their audiences, visual artists were striving to document the real problems in society. At the time, magazine publications grew in popularity with their striking photographic essays in black and white, generating high demands and proving that the public wanted a visual report on the world (Sloan, 2008).

Photographers and filmmakers alike used their cameras in similar ways and with similar purpose; to document the history of people, things, and events — all elements that are present in journalistic work. The visual stories they created in turn were intended to help influence viewers to remember and interpret their past and to establish a foundation for society's collective memory. Today, documentary images and films can be credited as media devices capable of powerfully affecting the human perception of the world and the public memory (Folkerts & Lacy, 2004).

Both documentary photography and film are also historically related to exploration, society, and social reform. They provide visual records of the past and often seek to promote social change. Although some documentary materials in media are more representative of discoveries and the landscape, social documentaries are tied to society and its people. What gives images meaning and empowers audiences to interpret them as historical artifacts is the context in which such images are produced. “Historians often regard photographs as critical form of documentary evidence that holds up a mirror to past events. Public and scholarly faith in the realism of the photographic image is grounded in a belief that a photograph is a mechanical reproduction of reality” (Curtis, 2003). The same is true about the documentary film.

Documentary images were also characterized with being educational. Riis's reformist work not only introduced the educational power of photography, but the former can also be viewed as one of the first examples of social documentary in the history of visual media. He accompanied his lectures with colorful vocabulary and rhetoric, creating powerful interpretive frameworks for viewers and persuading them to carry his message — the need for social reform. His photographs advanced the idea that at times images

could be used as political statements, meaning, they could demonstrate both a social problem and a solution (Carlson, 1981). This principle, among others noted in this thesis, lie in the heart of the social documentary tradition.

Thematic Statement

Putting the peculiarities of the visual social documentary genre into appropriate context requires a closer look into the historical development of visual media and the documentary film. In his book *Film: An Introduction*, film scholar William H. Phillips (2002), defines documentary film as a visual medium that represents its subjects in ways viewers are intended to accept them, as a fact, and not a product of someone's imagination. He explains how a documentary filmmaker's work is grounded in communicative insights, offering an understanding or improved social, political, or economic conditions (Phillips, 2002). Riis's work accomplished all of the above in both print media and public photo exhibitions.

In order to establish the connection between Riis's work and the visual social documentary genre this thesis takes into consideration some of the key elements that are present in a documentary movie such as presence of real people vs. actors, location shooting vs. production stage, artifacts, informative language vs. fictional script, and more. It also illuminates the ethnographic value of the photographer's account, his self-reflexive strategies highlighted in both his printed and spoken word as well as his photographic images. By looking at Riis's work as a social documentary form of investigative journalism, the thesis proposes the emergence and development of such journalistic conventions.

In addition, a closer look at nineteenth-century technological innovations informs the progression of the social documentary genre in mass media and demonstrates how the same depended on and was influenced by such developments. In his volume *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, historian Alan Trachtenberg (1982) points to technological progress and modernization, but barely touches on the role of visual innovations and their impact on society and culture. “Factories, railroads, and telegraph wires seemed the very engines of a democratic future. . . . If the machine seemed the prime cause of the abundance of new products changing the character of daily life, it also seemed responsible for newly visible poverty, slums, and an unexpected wretchedness of industrial conditions,” he writes (p. 38).

As this thesis takes a closer look at urbanization during the nineteenth century, it further suggests that the very nature of technological progress has ironically both fueled injustices in society and has aided crusaders like Riis to confront them. The study of technological growth and professional developments in the field of journalism and mass communication, particularly focusing on Jacob Riis’s revolutionary visual rhetoric and investigative journalism style, imply that societal needs for reform have the power to influence the creation of more prominent and impactful journalistic approaches in order to achieve massive effects.

Here, it is important to note that rhetoric is one of the main elements present in the visual documentary genre — whether in the form of still imagery or moving pictures. Film scholar Bill Nichols (1991) places the former in the realm of ideology too. “Rhetoric moves us away from style, to the other end of the axis, between author and viewer,” he writes. “If style conveys some sense of the author’s moral outlook on and

ethical position within the world, rhetoric is the mean by which the author attempts to convey his or her outlook persuasively to the viewer” (p. 134).

Indeed, this thesis proposes that a strong connection between documentary film and Riis’s social documentary photography and public slide exhibitions exists. It does so by synthesizing the reformer’s writings, photographs, slide presentations, audience reception, and critical reviews as published in the press during the nineteenth century. It also considers Riis’s photographic work and ethnography-like writings and presentations from a rarely addressed perspective — that of media, rather than art history, and discusses various modes of documentary film representation that closely correspond with Riis’s unique approach. In addition, it traces the emergence of urban photographic styles and the film medium through time in order to demonstrate that Riis’s work should be viewed as one of the chief precursors of the social documentary as a whole in visual media.

Significance of the Study

Scholars have studied Jacob Riis’s efforts largely in terms of artistic value, objectivity, or lack thereof, as well as the idea that the photographer’s personal account in taking audiences on a visual journey through the New York slums had negatively affected his journalistic credibility. This thesis offers a different, and a more intriguing look at Riis’s body of work. It discusses the significance of creating authentic images of society and the impact of the effective framing of detailed personal observations necessary to create social awareness. Journalism scholar Keith Kenney (2009) denotes that credibility improves precisely when the ethnographer (and in this case photographer

too) has spent sufficient time within a particular group in order to understand that group (p. 160).

Unlike today, Riis's time — the Gilded Age — was also the right time for infusing trust in photographers and their work as the available technology prevented extensive manipulation of image content, both before the camera's eye or later, during development and printing of photographic images. In this sense, this thesis addresses the power of Riis's efforts in influencing the social documentary genre in visual media through the means of realism and the use of new technologies, and discusses the journalistic integrity of his work in mass media and society as a whole.

In *The Birth of New Realism: Photography, Painting and the Advent of Documentary Cinema*, film historian Anthony R. Guneratne (1998) suggests that surveys of technological developments have monopolized accounts of early cinema history (p. 166). In order to further enhance such historical examinations, this thesis provides a deeper look at one individual's work and presents that history as one revolutionized chiefly by that individual — Jacob Riis.

Understanding the past of the social documentary in visual media also requires a study of the ways photography, documentary images, and films have been viewed by audiences — doing so allows for a deeper understanding of the overarching role visual media play in informing public opinion and supporting social discourse. Like today's "moving pictures" experience, the magic lantern of the nineteenth century has been one of the first projection devices able to communicate visually to larger audiences, allowing the presenter to manipulate that audience by both telling and showing the story.

French film theorist André Bazin (1967) has discussed the invention of cinema in terms of its relationship to nature precisely by viewing the development of photography and the introduction of visual realism to audiences. In his volume *The Myth of Total Cinema*, Bazin (1967) noted that the inspiration for inventing cinema and the accomplishment of doing so has been dominated by the techniques of mechanical reproduction of reality during the nineteenth century. Bazin described the re-creation of the external world in technological forms— from the photograph to the phonograph — as part of the freedom exercised by artists over “the irreversibility of time” (Bazin, 1967). Relative to Bazin’s ideas, this thesis presents Riis’s role in a somewhat different way — his “cinematic” approach, to the contrary, successfully integrated realistic and artistic interpretations and narratives, elevating them to a level of realism in the visual medium as close to nature (or in Riis’s case, the city), as possible. Riis brought image quality to a higher level of historical truth, now recognizable in documentary film.

It is also important to note that scholarly reviews of the influence of documentary photography and the advent of documentary cinema tend to focus more prominently on the Farm Security Administration leading practitioners such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks. They also often discuss the impact of technological developments and the relationship between motion picture fiction and cinematic realism. This thesis however provides a more comprehensive interpretation of the differences between motion pictures as a fictional story produced by a screenwriter and social documentary films representing the real stories of actual subjects.

In a similar manner, scholars have often cited pioneer photojournalist Mathew Brady as the inventor of documentary photography because of his brilliant work during

and after the American Civil War. This thesis' purpose however is not to argue such statement, but rather to illustrate a distinction between photojournalism and social documentary photography, to demonstrate the latter as a journalistic tool rather than fine art, and to present Jacob Riis as a leading social documentarian and journalist. The purpose of Riis's spectacle was indeed to make an argument using his images as documents and as evidence, hence illuminating some common and important qualities characteristic of the journalistic profession — truth and accuracy.

In addition, scholars have also often criticized Riis's work claiming the photographer held racial prejudice, accused some of the poor of being evil, and never provided any empirical evidence to his claims nor proposed any solutions to the tenement problem during his lectures (Czitrom, 2007). Some of these claims are rather bold (in his most prominent volume *How the Other Half Lives* Riis had included a few pages of statistics and drawings to support his quest). However, the purpose of studying his work is not to argue these claims, but to demonstrate the impact of visual evidence accompanied by powerful rhetoric as an effective approach to raise the consciousness of audiences and to promote a cause.

Surveying the reformer's work in its historical context also reveals an important aspect of the documentary image as a whole — its document-like quality, its ability to show unrehearsed moments in time and be the truthful representation of the subjects within its frame. Since its inception in the 1800s, documentary photography had proven to be timeless and influential on many levels. In this sense, both documentary photography and film are alike — they construct specific views of the social world and often aim to initiate change of that very same world.

As a leading figure among the muckrakers, Riis broke ground in another area, too — investigative journalism. However, historical volumes rarely mention him as a leading muckraker. He had shared the ideological sympathies and intense interest in economic issues with investigative pioneers such as Upton Sinclair, Ida M. Tarbell, and Lincoln Steffens. Unlike them however, Riis's main goal was not to simply expose corrupt politicians and wealthy entrepreneurs, and introduce their wrongdoings to the middle and lower social classes. His main purpose was to awaken the consciousness of the same corrupt politicians and wealthier folk in order to make a social reform. He effectively investigated the lower immigrant class living in the New York's tenements and used the more novel, at the time, visual narrative of the social issues. His visual rhetoric, as presented during magic lantern slide show exhibitions, had greatly influenced not only the field of journalism, but also that of the documentary in mass media as a whole.

In addition, Riis's body of work can be viewed from another, more sociologically significant perspective — that of an ethnographer and a social researcher. Visual scholar Jon Wagner (2004) argues that documentarians and social researchers face similar tasks while conducting visual empirical research. He suggests researchers and audiences alike find images of social life to be more credible when based on extensive and detailed observation — a major part of Riis's work. Wagner (2004) recounts that the credibility and utility of photographs within empirical social inquiry rest precisely in the aspects of the real world they reflect and are related to what people care about (p. 1479). In this sense, Riis knew he needed something more than just the photograph. He successfully used the technology available at the time to achieve his momentum.

Finally, the study of his self-reflexive social commentary can provide a deeper and a more meaningful understanding of the documentary genre and its influence in society. Riis's photography was largely inspired by his own experiences as an immigrant, and the study of his photographs in this context — from historical, sociological, journalistic, and artistic perspectives — can further address the way documentary is defined today. If such definition is determined by form, content, practice, or distribution, this approach has its roots in the mixture of ideology, technology, and social awareness that grew from Riis's pioneering work.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature pertinent to this thesis sheds light on the scholarly examinations of the birth, development, and popularization of visual realism in mass media as captured by the photographic medium and later, documentary film. In particular, in discussing Jacob Riis's life, career, photography, and activist work, the review of this literature illuminates the important role of Riis's multimodal visual presentation through his use of magic lantern slide exhibitions and lectures. Scholarly interpretations of his work made during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries emerge from a mix of artistic, oratorical, economic, and social disciplines. These studies have often focused on the cultural and creative aspects on the reformist's work and on its influence on society, too.

In *Writing with Light: Jacob Riis's Ambivalent Exposures*, Christopher Carter (2008) addresses the idea of a multimodal composition and the visual presentations as a form of rhetoric. In particular, he highlights Riis's career and the practice of social documentary as a form of "imageword" rhetoric for social reform. "Riis joined prose with pictures to intensify both the pathetic appeal and the apparent objectivity of his arguments," Carter writes. "From the middle of the nineteenth century, audiences associated photography with historical transparency, believing it is to 'rely less upon the imagination of the photographer than on the mute precision of solar energy'" (p. 118). Carter focuses on the artistic symbolism of Riis's work, the photographer's successful contribution to the building of society's collective identity, and his effective illumination

of the existing class system in New York City. By seeking to promote the growth of green spaces and parks while, in contrast, exposing darkness and gloom, Riis's innovative flash photography had enabled him to "let in the light" on the city's hidden disorders. This innovation, Carter argues, had provided both a technical impetus and a principal metaphor for Riis's curative strategy (p. 120).

The photographic technology development had indeed facilitated Riis's success as a reformer; "Riis welcomed the transition from the slow labor of wet collodion photography with its abundant chemicals and delicate developing process, to the comparative ease of dry plate technology" (Carter, 2008). Carter also recognizes the novelty in the photographers' approach and the success of his methods, as his creative (documentary-like) interplay of pictures and anecdotes, have offered the entertainment and civic instruction desired by nineteenth century audiences. Like moving pictures, Riis had slowly built his reform efforts upon the idea of travel through space and time by the very means of visual media and technical innovations available to him. Through visual rhetoric, the author notes, Riis advanced the investigative journalistic practice of exposing the sordid truths about New York tenement life (Carter, 2008).

What is more fascinating about his early cinematography-like work was his use of lighting and image-taking equipment. The documentary aspect, though not directly implied by Carter as such, became evident in the author's discussion about Riis's amateur approaches and his inability to "doctor" his images in post-production. The tight framing, chaotic angles, fast image-taking, capturing the moment in an instant, placement of protruding objects in the middle of the frame, the flash illuminating the darkest corners of tenement life are all approaches quite common in cinema, and they were Riis's ultimate

muckraker weapons (Carter, 2008). Carter recognizes the reformer's innovative journalistic approach by suggesting that through the means of multimodality Riis had performed a complex surveillance function for his spectators, a primary function of media. Riis's remediation of verbal and photographic modes of delivery made urban poverty a reality for his audiences in ways unmatched by most other texts of the era as books often depicted poor people as objects of compassion and disdain (Carter, 2008).

However, Carter's scholarship relies perhaps too heavily on one of the more prominent pieces to discuss Riis's revolutionary documentary approaches — *Silver Cities: Photographing American Urbanization 1839-1939* by art historian Peter Bacon Hales (2005), who places Riis as the central figure within his discussion of the development of the urban photography genre. The author's survey of the development of image making technologies, such as the daguerreotype and stereograph, and their popularization are key to this thesis' focus. After all, American photography as a whole had started its humble journey into mass media in the urban city — the hub for scientific and artistic information (Hales, 2005).

Hales' entire volume itself is an important contribution to scholarship about photography and urbanization. It is a seminal narrative about the Gilded Age society and the way it had perceived and adjusted to city life with the help of one of its more influential media devices at the time — the image. Hales (2005) offers a comprehensive developmental history about the artistic, scientific, and economic impact of earlier photographic technologies utilized in New York City before, during, and after Riis's era. Hales' survey proposes the existence of a connection between the growing business nature of photography and the mass production of the relatively new visual medium. And

in a sense, this connection very closely describes the evolution of photography compared to the development of one of the earliest forms of mass media since the invention of the printing press — the newspaper. His narrative about daguerreotypists, for example, offers a closer look at the practice of image making with the rapidly changing new technologies “Most of these men believed that photography might be a means of simultaneously elevating national taste and generating hard cash,” he argues. “And, in its early form, it required skills and knowledge, leisure and capital found almost exclusively in the urban elite. None of this stopped them from an obsessive pursuit of this magical new medium” (p.15).

Hales (2005) contends that at the time, there was a struggle to fit the new visual medium of the late nineteenth century into the understanding of interlocking concepts such as art, science, religion, commerce, and democracy. The writings and images of photographers revealed, Hales writes, “a lively debate between seeing small, one-of-a-kind silver-plate images as miracles of nature, as malleable artistic productions, as new products for democratic entrepreneurial activity, or as — potentially, at least — some happy confluence of the three” (p 12). Hales (2005) indirectly proposes the existence of a film-like approach to Riis’s work, describing the photographer’s unique social documentary techniques, and centers his argument within a critical narrative about photography as a whole — American urbanization.

Hales (2005), though not overtly, suggests another connection to Jacob Riis — the idea that photography was a true immigrant medium — moving in slowly at first, but more assertively with time. Popularization of the image during the Gilded Age has been directly related with urbanization. “Photography in this era thus became deeply involved

in the process of mastering the city and in the concomitant process of creating new ordering principles by which the city could be understood, made to yield its virtues and symbolize the success of his controllers” (p. 93). This statement also indirectly supports Carter’s (2008) argument that Riis’s work served as visual evidence of the growing separation between social classes at the time.

Unlike Carter, Hales (2005) declares Riis the leading urban photography figure during the Gilded Age. “Probably more than any other single individual in the history of the genre, Riis brought together the technological, philosophical, and stylistic strands of his time and his culture,” Hales writes (p. 271). Riis’s work had never depended on the same stylistic conventions most artists and documentarians had strived for, yet his ethnographic approach had enabled audiences to go beyond the simple act of looking at a photograph as a work of art, or as a document or a piece of evidence. He had set an example for future photographers and social reformers alike and, as Hales (2005) suggests, Riis can be considered an inventor of the documentary form. “Riis’s work pointed towards a wide range of documentary options, and it set the genre into play by proposing the integral function of photography as a tool of self-declared evidence and self-concealing artfulness of rhetoric” (p. 341).

In reality, precisely by discussing this aspect of the medium and recounting about early practitioners, Hales (2005) effectively sets the stage not only for Riis, but also for the grand entrance of the magic lantern device and the convincing realism of stereoscopic slide presentations as a new form of social documentary. The extraordinary realism enabled by such presentations had successfully blurred the already ambiguous line between earlier image-producing inventions such as the daguerreotype, and the visual

reality it had represented without actual mediation (Hales, 2005). Moreover, it had highlighted the start of a mediated social documentary photography, a practice that the art-focused daguerreotypists had not considered.

Riis had effectively used the same stereoscopic device to jump the barriers of the poor reproduction techniques available at newspaper organizations, and to ultimately, successfully “mass-produce” his work in order to reach a wider audience. Maren Stange (1989) adds to Hales’ account with her detailed examination of Riis’s work from a somewhat different perspective than the one most scholars employ when it comes to Riis’s work— the impact of his photography and rhetoric as presented during his public magic lantern slide exhibitions. In *Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture: The Lantern Slide Exhibition as Entertainment and Ideology*, photography Stange (1989) focuses on the success of these showings and the fact that they have ultimately led to the publishing of newspaper and magazine articles, Riis’s popular book *How the Other Half Lives* and later, his autobiography *The Making of an American*.

She denotes that the positive influence of Riis’s work came from his ability to bring realism and dramatization. While highlighting his credibility as an orator, she describes his lectures as filled with anecdotes, and his image captions as bursting with ideological messages.

Riis’s photographs were described by contemporaries as “pictures of reeking, murder-stained, god-forsaken alleys and poverty stricken tenements,” sensational language and later documentary presentations would neither earn nor deserve, and his dramatic written and spoken narratives seemed a far cry from the carefully

“scientific” and statistical texts and captions we find in the Progressive era
(p. 275).

Stange (1989) suggests that although Riis’s photographs were current with the imagery re-presented in urban visual culture, the success of his work depended on his ability to ground his rhetoric and connect it with a popular nineteenth century form of entertainment — magic lantern slide shows — in order to attract urban middle-class audiences.

As a crafty documentarian, Riis had used two projectors, creating 10-foot square images, transitioned by dissolve mechanism and shown in a perfect sequence that was accompanied by a powerful narrative. Similarly to documentary film, dramatic devices such as lighting, captions, and rhetoric, have successfully directed viewers’ attention and have helped them create a meaning, “slides were related to each other in pairs or groups for which Riis’s remarks served as ‘relay,’ moving audiences along through story-telling sequences of images like those encountered in comic strips or films” (Stange, 1989).

With his work, Riis and his fellow photographers successfully pioneered a new and more accomplished level of photography — one bound by realism. By reconstructing the historical context and meaning of this work Stange (1989) appropriately (and accurately) re-represents Riis’s practice by placing it at the beginning of the social documentary genre — a “photographic discourse distinct from other forms of visual culture and other photographic practices” (p. 299).

The author also indirectly addresses the power of realism in photographs, a notion discussed in detail by the prominent scholar of rhetoric and media Bruce E. Gronbeck. In his *Visual Rhetorical Studies: Traces Through Time and Space*, Gronbeck (2008)

proclaimed that precisely the realism in visuals can influence society and inspire action. While elaborating on the evolution of the image in media he suggested an idea closely related to this thesis — Riis's influence, as a journalist and a photographer, on society and social reform. "The realism of photos, in combination with eyewitness journalism, created a potent rhetorical combination," Gronbeck wrote. "The sense that photographic images and journalistic words are materially or experientially grounded made them feel like transparent windows on the world" (Gronbeck, 2008)

Here, it is important to distance documentary photography from fine art as in journalistic terms, it is the documentary photographer's primary purpose to focus on the subject at hand and to communicate effectively the context and emotion involved with it to his or her audience. In *Photography as Communication*, historian David Nye (1986) accurately placed documentary photography in the realm of subjectivity by default. "The documentary photographer differs sharply from the artist at precisely this point, because in documentary work the subject is always the reason for the photograph's being," Nye writes. "The whole thrust of the photograph must be to communicate some value in the subject to the viewer" (p. 34).

Although Riis's documentary photography has several subjective elements, the same also successfully suggests precisely the value of subjectivity and its credibility. The nature of Riis's work offers a solid support for the need and the importance of that very personal connection between a photographer and his or her subjects. Scholars recognize this fact, as well as the idea that Riis's first-hand experiences have not only influenced his work but have also enriched it.

Communication scholar Reginald Twigg (1992), for example, cites Stange's work in *The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis' How the Other Half Lives* while discussing documentary as a form of surveillance. The author denotes that precisely Riis's voyeuristic approach and personal (and rather subjective) "immersion" in the most intimate moments of his subjects are critical to the motivation behind his photography. He rightfully places Riis's rhetoric in the center of the Gilded Age's social reform literature. "The 'documentary realism' of *How the Other Half Lives* was an attempt to provide stable, monologic images of reality through photographic and narrative portraits of urban slum life," Twigg writes. "In subtle, yet ideologically powerful ways, documentary realism poetically transformed the surveyed Other into a manageable, containable, and usable fiction, who, in the process, was politically marginalized" (p. 309).

Riis's work was grounded in the portrayal of precisely these marginalized others through the means of photography and often bitter and powerful, yet candid, rhetoric. In *Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenges of Jacob Riis* Edward T. O'Donnell (2004) argues against the denunciations of Riis by revisionist scholars who have described him as "an unreconstructed racist who merely posed as a benevolent reformer" (p. 7). O'Donnell (2004) analyzes Riis's career to demonstrate that despite the instances of lapse into a racist stereotype language, he exhibited a higher degree of tolerance in comparison to his contemporaries. He suggests Riis's words and images would rather enrich the public historian simply because of their realism and when put into context, would further allow the historian to delve into complex issues such as

cultural diversity, social control, middle-class fear, labor exploitation, and inequality as seen through the eyes of an immigrant (p. 7).

O'Donnell (2004) openly criticizes public historians who seemed to share the need to produce mostly "feel good" documentaries, exhibitions, and programming, a disconnect he felt while working as a tour guide at New York City's Lower East End and Ellis Island. He finds a similar divide between popular views of Riis's photos and proposes that the former are grounded in the idea of selective memory.

Popular culture reveres Riis for his pioneering use of photography to expose the evils of tenement life and bring about reforms to housing, parks, and schools. The reason for the selective memory is simple: Riis's words seem not to correspond with his photos, or at least the contemporary meaning attached to them in the white ethnic narrative of immigration. (p. 12)

O'Donnell (2004) casts Riis as both an important social reformer and a pioneer of production techniques and photo-documentaries. He grounds these assessments in the idea of documentary photography's quality of a rational, objective, and factual medium as opposed to it being a subject to biases of its creator. He praises Riis's realism and his "distance" from his subjects (O'Donnell, 2004).

Precisely the subjectivity in his work as an immigrant himself with similar experiences to those of the people he was advocating for has been the key factor in his credibility. Although there are still many critiques out in the open, Riis's contributions to social change hold a solid place in American culture and history and have been recognized as such by writers, journalists, filmmakers, and public historians.

The degree of subjectivity present in Riis's work finds support in the notion that he practices empirical social inquiry and ethnography, which calls both on others and the practitioner, whether "a journalist, a writer, a photographer, or a doctor or a teacher. This mix of the objective and the subjective is a constant presence and, for many of us, a constant challenge" (Coles, 1997). In this sense, Riis's personal accounts can be viewed as rather influential for his credibility during his efforts to inform audiences and affect social discourse.

Similarly to , William (Bill) J. Hug (2010), examines the integrity of Riis's work relative to his portrayal of the urban poor. In *Jacob Riis and Double Consciousness: The Documentary/Ethnic "I" in How the Other Half Lives*, Hug (2010) argues against the criticisms of the photographer for his alleged nativist assumptions. He addresses accusations that Riis in general had a condescending perspective on his subjects, noting that despite the important information such evaluations may provide, they are also "rather simple and narrow intellectually, psychologically, and above all, rhetorically; terms that do not account accurately for the individual and his work" (Hug, 2010).

The article offers a successful analysis of the documentary context from which Riis's "I" effectively delivered the intended message. To do so, Hug (2010) examines a definition of the documentary genre coined by William Scott who had suggested that the official dictionary meaning of documentary — or provable and objective — melds together with the "unofficial" human document, or the personal account of it that carries and communicates feeling and raw drama (p. 133). In this sense, precisely Riis's lengthy ethnic immersion has been instrumental in his sensitive commentary on the immigrant plight. The photographer had incorporated the subjective thoughts and feelings of the "I"

simply because he was after all one of the immigrants. Riis's reactions towards American prejudice against Blacks and Native Americans have been quite similar, but as a fellow immigrant, he had successfully detached himself from such prevalent stereotypes, allowing him to understand the people and the issues (Hug, 2010).

Hug (2010) notes that Riis must have faced quite a challenge when persuading his largely hostile nativist audience to take a sympathetic viewpoint toward the immigrant (p. 140). The photographer would have had to be careful in managing his own self-portrayal, a rather complex journalistic task Riis had successfully employed in *How the Other Half Lives*. Here, the author elaborates on the *double-consciousness* phenomenon, a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois and defined as “the peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amuse contempt and pity” (p. 142). Du Bois had proposed that the self, when defined by the *status quo* as inferior, becomes two sets of souls and thoughts in one body — “two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals” (p. 143).

Here it is also important to note Barbie Zelizer's idea about the role of the image in creating and sustaining collective memory. In *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* she proposes the notion that images are not merely vehicles of new information, but they are grounded in the symbolism of socially shared concepts or beliefs and are simplified glimpses of the past in service of the present (Zelizer, 2010). In her 2004 piece *The Voice of the Visual in Memory*, she also elaborates on a few key elements relevant in both, photography and journalism. “Visual work often involves catching the sequencing of events or issues midstream, strategically freezing it at its potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation,” Zelizer writes. “This point is

crucial for explaining the role of images in memory. It suggests that images help us remember the past by freezing its representation at a powerful moment already known to us (p. 158). Sharing Du Bois idea (seen in Riis's approach to his own work too), journalists and documentary photographers alike produce images to contribute to the collective memory. In turn, audiences engage with images while "measuring their souls by the tape of the world."

Scholarship reveals how Riis's work illustrates a critical moment in the development of visual documentaries, a collection of work that brought to audiences unrehearsed moments in time and is the truthful representation of the subject within its frame. A review of literature about Jacob Riis and social documentary offers support to the idea that both documentary photography and film are alike in the sense that they construct specific views of the social world that could be highly subjective, yet unrehearsed and truthful depictions of economic equalities and social injustice. However, it is also important to note that in that same scholarship there is rarely a mention of Riis's influence as a journalist — reporting the truth about social conditions, or as an early cinematographer — putting technological inventions to work and pairing the same with ideology in order to produce an effective documentary visual spectacle. The available scholarship is that very bridge between Riis's work relative to the journalism profession, technological growth, and the emergence of documentary moving pictures, as integral parts of real journalistic work. This thesis further builds upon that connection in order to invoke the idea that the Riis's work is revolutionary in more than one way, both in the field of journalism and visual mass media as a whole.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Historiographical Analysis

Despite limitations of technology during the nineteenth century, the social documentary can be seen as having its roots in media well before it was recognized as an independent genre of film and photography. The most appropriate methodological approach to analyze these institutional changes can be found in using the developmental and progressive angles of scholars who have specialized in the historiography of analyzing primary sources, interpreting Riis's work in context with the media and social conditions of the era. Developmental historians — those who have focused on developments within a particular institution and how these developments later affected society — play a unique role in understanding nineteenth-century photojournalism. Likewise, progressive historians — those who focused on the ways individuals addressed economic and social issues — also play a unique role in understanding Riis's biography.

A review of secondary literature reveals scholars have used primarily developmental and progressive approaches to study the Gilded Age and photography from the era; however, they have not yet developed an adequate understanding of Riis's photographs both as the precursor to a much larger transformation in media or as an agent of social reform.

From the invention of the printing press to modern-day digitization, the field of mass media has a rich history. Interpreting this history by using a developmental

approach — in other words, the survey of the continued development of media practices and the individuals who have contributed to media progress — is arguably one of the most comprehensive and pervasive approaches a historian could consider when exploring the field (Sloan and Stamm, 2010).

The main concern of developmental historians, such as Frederic Hudson, James Melvin Lee, Willard G. Bleyer, and Frank Luther Mott, was how the press became a journalistic instrument. They (among others) primarily emphasized in their writings historical trends such as press freedom and media-government relations (Sloan and Stamm, 2010). The expansion of visual media, such as documentary photography and film, can be studied in a similar fashion — as journalistic tools documenting and commenting on society. Its history can be interpreted by its contributions to present journalistic standards.

In order to build the basis for the study of the social documentary genre in visual media, it is necessary to return to the beginnings of photography, the development of photographic technology and image-making practices. Jacob Riis's innovative approach as a photographer and a journalist therefore serves as the prime example for the origins of the social documentary genre in visual media. This thesis discusses the reformer by surveying his work in terms of concepts engrained in the developmental interpretation of journalism's history — media practices of individuals who have made undeniable contributions to media progress.

Additionally, Riis's reform efforts can be studied as representative of the progressive approach to history, inasmuch as progressives such as Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, Claude Bowers, and Vernon L. Parrington, have historically

tended to illuminate the effects of particular individuals in addressing the need for reform and social change. The Progressives believed the media was best used as a tool in crusades for “liberal, social, and economic causes, and to fight on the side of the masses of the common, working people against the entrenched interests in American business and government” (Sloan and Stamm, 2010). Pioneers such as Riis were after all the ones who had bestowed to greater democracy and had paved the way to modern day investigative journalism and the social documentary genre.

In order to contribute to the developmental and progressive interpretations of the state of media during the Gilded Age, this thesis studies the context in which Riis worked by analyzing primary sources such as advertisements, reviews, and publications offering commentaries about his magic lantern slide show presentations. The thesis also takes a deeper look at the progress of the Gilded Age’s photographic technology and reviews primary sources featuring discussions about photography, technology, and film, and their impact in society as a whole. Furthermore, Riis’s photographic work in particular is also reviewed in terms of the ideological perspective of a muckraker hungry for reform, and a progressive interested in visually presenting social reality to his contemporaries in order to illustrate their relationship to themselves and to others.

The study of newspaper publications in which Riis discusses the society and the need for reform is presented in order to support the progressive interpretation of journalists’ quest for democracy: A closer look at Jacob Riis’s books *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Making of an American* and their social documentary value further illuminates the contributions of the reformer. All primary sources identified as pertinent to this study were chosen relative to their contribution to an understanding of visual

documentaries — their content, practice, and distribution — as well how the history of documentary may be viewed in contemporary terms.

By focusing on examples of Riis's work and tracing the emergence of the film medium through time, this thesis has already begun to look for demonstrable connections between documentary film and Riis's photography and public slide exhibitions. The photographic and textual examples were chosen based on their ability to elaborate on the significance of Riis's quest to raise awareness about social issues and to highlight his quest for social reform.

The thesis relies largely on online primary sources found in databases such as ProQuest's and the Library of Congress' historic newspapers collections. It is important to note that this approach is also one of the limitations to the thesis. Other relevant archival materials such as Riis's letters and diaries have not been studied because they have not yet been digitized. In lieu of this fact, the thesis uses manuscript material gathered by photographer, educator, and Riis historian Alexander Alland, Sr. featured in his biography *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer & Citizen*.

Alland Sr. had studied Riis's letters, lecture narratives, scrapbook clippings, and pocket diaries as found in The Library of Congress manuscript archives. With the help of Jacob Riis's son, Roger William Riis, Alland, Sr. has been able to track down the whereabouts of Jacob Riis's slides and negatives, too. A box containing 163 lantern slides had been discovered at Riis's farm in Massachusetts, additional 412 glass negatives, 161 lantern slides and 193 prints have successfully been recovered by the new owners of Riis's old family house in Richmond Hill on Long Island. "They took the collection to Roger William's home in Manhattan and, finding no one there, left it outside

the door. On November 15, 1946, R. W. Riis presented the collection to the Museum of the City of New York” (Alland Sr., 1974).

The images included in support of the main argument of this thesis are photographs of the glass plates Riis had used in his lifetime work that are preserved at the Museum of the City of New York and are available in the museum’s online archive. These images are examined in terms of the circumstances under which they were made as well as the situations in which they were promoted, viewed, and understood by society. This approach is necessary in order to understand the communicative power of an image, a power, according to historians Aiello and Thurlow, residing “not solely within the images themselves, but also within the context of how and why the images were produced and distributed” (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006).

This thesis also studies media from a relatively underutilized perspective, combining two historiographical approaches relative to photography. While historians of the nineteenth century have indeed used developmental and progressive approaches in previous research, they had done so almost exclusively relative to the newspaper industry and textual examples, neglecting visual media and particularly the evolution of photography and film as powerful mass media tools for surveillance and social reform. The institutional uses of photography — not photographic techniques — are what make people see and believe in photographs as factual and real artifacts (Rose, 2007).

Visual Discourse Analysis

The historiography itself functions as the basis of a visual discourse analysis. A sample of Riis's images is included as a supplement to the textual examples as both photographs and film are forms of text themselves. A visual discourse analysis is applied also with the idea to discuss the institutional power of photography — with mass media playing the role of the “institution.” To study the meaning of an image in the manner proscribed by this thesis, the visual discourse analysis focuses on ideology and the way social differences were constructed and interpreted during Riis's era (Weintraub, 2009). As a reference, communication scholar David Weintraub's *Visual Communication Research Designs* (2009) outlines this technique as one precisely relevant to society. He defines ideology as “a system of shared beliefs and values diffused throughout society by a discourse consisting of images, myths, ideas, and concepts... Ideology and power are related through discourse: discourse is what gives ideology its power,” the author claims. (Weintraub, 2009).

As part of the visual discourse analysis, this thesis comments on how social differences were constructed and viewed by Riis — an immigrant, a muckraker, and a reformer. In order to get behind the scenes and understand his ideological worldview, the thesis addresses questions, including: How did Riis's photographs, when accompanied with narrative, portray the social reality? What ideologies are being represented by them? What power relationships are being established?

But to achieve that, one must look at society, media of the time, and the historical context as seen through the eyes of Jacob Riis himself, to immerse in the location and the time period the photographer had made his mark on immigrant life, the city, and history

itself. Using previous analyses made by historians of photography, this thesis based its archival research on the understanding that particular versions of reality may be viewed as a form of discourse, whether visual, written, or oral (Weintraub, 2009). The survey of Riis's photographic and slide exhibition work is precisely grounded in this notion of social discourse, or the knowledge about the society and how that society is understood. It also serves to interpret how Riis's contemporaries viewed journalism, documentary, and the newly emerging field of visual media. The analysis explores the idea that media images construct specific views of the social world and contribute to social production and effect. Ultimately, the former have the power to change society, its values, ideals, and view of itself.

In order to construe Riis's photographic work in terms of its impact on society, the methods in this study apply some of the strategies for the rhetorical organization of discourse proposed by Weintraub (2009). Such an approach to the visual discourse analysis focuses on ideology and the relationship between power and knowledge in society. The nine images chosen to complement the historiographical analysis were carefully selected in order to convey the main idea of the thesis. They were cropped of their glass plate frames and sharpened using photographic software solely in order to reveal as many details as possible for publication purpose. The content of each image remains intact and undisturbed.

The main criteria based on which these photographs were chosen relied on two goals; first, the images had to have been taken solely by Riis himself rather than be collaborative efforts with his partners Richard H. Lawrence and Henry G. Pifford, second, the images had to have similar content — immigrants — which were the

motivation for Riis's reform work. The primary content of each image consists of neighborhoods, dwellings, and the people living in them. Each image selected depicts the individual and his or her surroundings in a particular way.

Here, it is important to note that the visual discourse analysis does not focus on subject, camera angle, and other compositional elements typically included in visual analyses, but concentrates only on select visual elements proposed by Weintraub (2009). This "modified" approach was chosen in order to make the study of these images more relevant to the thesis. The analysis is intended to accompany the historiographical aspect of the study in contemplation to more effectively convey the relationship between technology, ideology, and social awareness, and to demonstrate an existing strong connection between Jacob Riis's social documentary photography and documentary film. To achieve that, the analysis of the images is used to identify key themes in terms of accompanying text, social context, construction, and ideology. It serves to examine more deeply the way these images conveyed messages of truth, to study their complexity, their contradictions, and their reception by the audience in order to explain how a group of images constructed and conveyed reality.

This approach to a visual discourse analysis is employed to further highlight Riis as a leading figure, both from developmental and progressive perspectives. It is intended to demonstrate that despite limitations of technology during the nineteenth century, the photographer's "visual" quest for social reform should be viewed as a chief precursor of the social documentary genre in both photography and film.

Documentary Modes of Representation

Interwoven in the historical and visual discourse analyses, this thesis further builds upon the connection of Riis's work to documentary film. The commentary focuses on a more modern idea about "documenting" society — the concept of documentary modes of representation coined by cinema studies scholar Bill Nichols (1991). In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Nichols (1991) suggests that these modes are basic ways of organizing texts in relation to recurrent features and conventions. The author proposes the existence of four dominant modes of representation in documentary film in particular: expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive (p. 32). Although not all elements pertinent to those modes apply in Riis's case, the broader idea of each mode is very much exemplified by his work. Discussing them strengthens the notion that there is an existing strong connection between Riis's magic lantern slide exhibitions and documentary film.

The examination of the main characteristics of each representation mode and detailed discussion about how each is reflected in Riis's work and the way the latter was interpreted by the Gilded Age society can build a stronger connection between the past and the present of the visual medium. Such an approach offers support to one of the main ideas of this thesis — Riis's value as an ethnographer, journalist, and chief contributor to the emergence of documentary film and the social documentary genre in visual media.

Lastly, the thesis discusses the social documentary genre of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It compares Riis's work to that of writer and photographer Jacob Holdt, and *The New York Times* journalist Andrea Elliott. The goal of this commentary is to review the transformations that have occurred within the social documentary genre as a result of

changing technologies and forms of presentation. It also aims to shed light on the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the visual social documentary as an approach to social criticism and reform in present time.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This thesis proposes the idea that the mixture of ideology, technology, and social awareness are among the primary components for a successful social reform. It further suggests that visual media play a key role as a tool to communicate meaning and ideology. Developmental and progressive schools can best grasp Jacob Riis's contributions to journalism history and the way he influenced changes in journalistic practices and utilized photojournalism to promote social change. Yet, his journalistic endeavors should also account for his introduction of the social documentary genre in journalism.

Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols (1991) defines documentary as a form of expression that requires the establishment of an issue, the presentation of the background of that issue, the discussion of its complexity, followed by a proposed solution. The field of journalism functions in a similar fashion, drawing from facts and realities, commenting on matters, presenting various points of view, and guiding audiences to conclusions. "In fact, documentary scenes are more heavily organized around the principle of sound, or spoken commentary," Nichols writes of documentary films (pp. 17-18). Riis's photographic exhibitions and lectures are illustrations of the above definitions, and very much representative of the intertwined realms of documentary film and journalism.

Here it is important to add that Riis's photographic work and ethnography-like writings and presentations are also typically viewed from a rarely addressed perspective

— that of media, rather than art history and the latter is also the case with documentary film. In order to understand Riis's impact on society and his influence on the social documentary genre in visual media, one must first understand the ideology of Riis and his contemporaries, the advances of photographic technology and its use as a journalistic tool, and the changes in journalistic practices because of the interplay of the above concepts.

In *Development of American Journalism*, journalism historian Sidney Kobre (1969) noted that the Gilded Age publications were heavily influenced by the changing cultural climate and technological developments (p. 356). City life of the late 1800s was reflected in the press, as reporters and publishers frequently commented on existing class differences and focused on the poor families living in desolate tenements and crime-ridden slums. "Responding to the needs of society, many publishers, editors, and reporters developed a keen social consciousness, a feeling of responsibility for the unfortunates of American democracy," Kobre wrote (p. 356).

In order to study the social documentary genre in visual media, or precisely its evolution from early photography to film and the journalistic power of both, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between technology and ideology. The changing media technologies and image-producing practices are interrelated with society and its understanding of such advances as the former can affect the latter and vice versa. After all, visuals and reproduction practices undoubtedly changed the way news is produced and consumed on many levels.

Scholarly texts that focus on wood engravings, photography, and later, film typically place these visual mediums within the field of fine art. The same is also true for

newspaper publications during the Gilded Age. An 1886 *New York Times* piece titled *Amateur Photography* even presented photography and slide presentations similar to those of Riis, as a form of entertainment rather than social commentary and/or visual reporting. The segment served to announce an upcoming photographic exhibition and was one of the many articles to come intended to promote the emerging field of photography as a form of amusement.

Riis's first public illustrated lecture titled *The Other Half: How it Lives and Dies in New York* was held on January 25, 1888, before the Society of Amateur Photographers. It featured one hundred magic lantern slides and was presented in a vaudeville style — accompanied by anecdotes and organ music (Czitrom, 2007). However, his documentary work had no place in a vaudeville show and a developmental historian can consider this particular period as the beginning of the subtle dissociation of visual media, more so illustrations and photography, from art, and placing it in the fields of visual reporting and journalism.

During those early stages of photographing the surrounding wonders of the city, it was the amateur wave — those who had no formal training or professional affiliation, like Jacob Riis — who were also recognized for paving the way to new technologies and introducing new photojournalistic conventions. They all were striving to make improvements of cameras and image production techniques, and to make picture taking a less cumbersome experience. Riis's interest in photography was one of an amateur too. He had no formal training and in his biography titled *The Making of an American*, originally published in 1901, he described himself as being no good at the skill and a rather “clumsy” photographer (p. 175). Yet he had an immense interest in taking pictures

and a great appreciation for the equipment and its power to convey a message. “The thing is a constant marvel to me, and an unending delight,” Riis wrote. “To watch the picture come out upon the plate that was blank before, and that saw with me for perhaps the merest fraction of a second, maybe months before, the thing it has never forgotten, is a new miracle every time” (Riis, 1959).

His famous “flash and dash” technique, involving a rapid flash of light at Riis’s surprised subjects followed by his fleeing of the scene was one of his many contribution to the field. “I substituted a frying-pan for the revolver, and flashed the light on that,” Riis wrote about the makeshift invention in his autobiography. “Twice I set fire to the house with the apparatus, and once one to myself” (Riis, 1959). During the same time, numerous newspaper publications were including articles about camera equipment, image-making techniques, and tips on how photographers can improve their artistry. Photographic practices were changing at the same time photographers developed and demanded new and more advanced technologies.

An 1888 piece in the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized the merits of amateurs and their contribution to improved photographic technologies, as well as the popularization of the medium during the Gilded Age. The article discussed recent photographic inventions such as compact cameras that would not attract attention and could be carried under one’s coat, also known as detective cameras. “All these developments of compact and light apparatus are solely due to the demands of amateur photographers,” the article read (Sketch of a Rapidly Growing Popular Diversion, 1888). The same demand, of both artisans and the audience, can be viewed as the trigger for technological changes that occurred from the days of the still photographic image, turned into a magic lantern slide

and projected on a large screen and later, the moving pictures camera. Back then, visuals were just beginning to make an impact on audiences.

During the late 1800s, photography not only attracted the attention of amateurs, but scientists and other professionals, too. “‘It is an astounding discovery — one of the most marvelous of the present age.’ It was in these words that an eminent scientist lately referred to the new and wonderful invention of photography which everybody is discussing,” stated the *New York Times* in an 1896 article titled “Great Photography: What the Wonderful New Invention May Show Regarding Things We Already Know.”

By that time, photographers were also beginning to take interest in documenting of the social conditions in the city, “reporting” and “documenting” through visuals, and acting as the public watchdogs in a rather journalistic fashion. An 1891 article in the *New York Times* disclosed information about photographers taking pictures of voters during Election Day in Philadelphia. “The camera is constantly being employed in some new field. For the detection of wrong-doers it is now used,” the article stated (Amateur Photography: Great Progress in Picture Making in This Country, 1891). In addition, devices such as the stereopticon and the magic lantern were also widely used during lectures held at camera clubs, as noted in many nation-wide publications. Newspapers were promoting and recognizing the value of photographs being coupled with the magic lantern for exhibiting photographic work publicly.

Publications such as the popular at the time *New York Times* frequently published a section titled *Amateur Photography* in which past or upcoming photographic lantern slide exhibition were reviewed and promoted. Such examples include a March 9, 1891, article titled *Pleasing Lantern Slide Exhibition Last Evening* and a March 30, 1891,

article titled *Some Recent Interesting Exhibitions of Lantern Slides*, both offering reviews of “entertainments” held in New York and promoting upcoming exhibitions of urban photographs taken around the country. “When finished, the society will have a complete photographic survey of the city to file away in its archives and prints, while lantern slides of the principle objects of interest will furnish amusement and instruction for the visitors of the Winter exhibition,” the *New York Times* article stated (*Some Recent Interesting Exhibitions of Lantern Slides*, 1891). Photographers and journalists alike were beginning to take note of society and to build upon its historical documentation through the means of visual media in order to enrich its collective memory.

In Riis’s case, these exhibitions, or representations, and his advocacy to convey the idea there is a need for social reform through the means of technology and rhetoric more closely resemble the attributes of a documentary film. Nichols (1991) best describes this idea as he denotes; “Representations are what the text constructs: ‘truth claims’ not simply of what exists in the world but, in a strong sense, of what meaning, explanation, or interpretation should be assigned to what exists in the world,” Nichols writes. “It is here that elements of narrative, rhetoric, style, and representation commingle” (p. 116).

Riis was not far behind in telling the story of a city either. More precisely, he was interested in the social aspect of it rather than its architectural beauty; he devoted his work to advocate for the greater good in society, for the betterment of the poverty-ridden Mulberry Bend tenements and the immigrants living in them. Since his photographs were not widely reproduced in the press he took it upon himself to lecture in public spaces, primarily schools and churches, while utilizing the popular at the time magic lantern device. “Remembering my early experience with the magic lantern,” he wrote, “I had had

slides made from my negatives, and on February 28, 1888, I told their story in the Broadway Tabernacle” (Riis, 1959). What distances him from other amateurs is his use of rhetoric to present an argument about an ill in society and to urge his audience of a need for reform — both traits quite common in social documentary film as well.

Here Nichols’ (1991) ideas about the documentary logic can best describe the work Riis was doing. The photographer’s commentary, which accompanied his magic lantern slide show presentations, was at a higher level than his vision, or perspective, as shown in his images. “It is a more overt and direct form of argumentation,” Nichols wrote. “Commentary can include not only direct address (voice-over narrations or on-screen authorities, for example) but also other tactics or devices (elements of style and rhetoric) that draw attention away from perspective” (p. 118). Nichols (1991) identifies the presence of an argument and the placement of evidence before audiences as the organizational backbone of documentary (p. 125). The same is often also true in journalism.

Taken from a developmental point of view, an article, published by the *New York Times* in 1896, suggests that by that time the newspaper industry had not only began promoting the craft, but had also began recognizing the impact of illustrations based on photographs on upcoming changes in the field of journalism.

Few people are, perhaps, aware of the great importance the illustrating of the daily newspaper has attained in the last few years. The history of the gradual development of the art, the facilities made possible by the continued improvement of methods, discoveries in photography, and the astonishing rapidity by which the

work is executed, are all parts of the history of modern journalism (Club for Newspaper Artists, 1896).

However, it was not until the early 1900s when technology allowed photojournalists to be more widely published and to be recognized for their work. In 1909 *The Washington Post* published a piece by Frederick J. Haskin further recognizing the place of photography in what was then modern journalism. The piece opened with a paragraph concerning important inventions such as the telegraph and the steam engine, placing photography only a step below when it came to the importance of “the mechanical reformation of the habits of civilized man ... Photography has visualized the current history of the hour and has brought before they eye the wonders of the universe,” Haskin wrote. “Photography has taken an important position in journalism, and it’s becoming more and more to be used as vehicle for transmuting ordinary intelligence” (Popular Photography, 1909).

Later, in a 1921 *Los Angeles Times* article the newspaper recognized the function of photojournalism as integral part of documenting and reporting at the time. “Photography has become an integral part of journalism,” the newspaper declared. While discussing a prominent photographer Charles Curtis, the article contended that the man who started as amateur when the technology was first introduced to being a veteran in the field was never without his camera under his coat and a professional who sometimes “beats the reporter to the news” (Camera Men First, 1921).

The visualization of reality and the documentation of society, in a way, has already been introduced a decade or so earlier with the first “moving pictures” of the Lumière brothers. Although in a number of respects, the brothers had set the stage for the beginning of the documentary film tradition; however, their craft was more widely

viewed as an entertainment and an attraction. Their work has been credited with being an art rather than a journalistic endeavor. Here is where Riis's magic lantern reportage and his use of "moving images," both literally and metaphorically, differ. The Lumières' short films, though realistic and drawn from life, were by no means intended to raise the consciousness of society and evoke desire for social change. It is true they were documentary in nature, but after all, their main purpose was to entertain.

Arguably, and 20 or so years later, newsreels bridged the gap between the aspect of art and that of documentary. It was no longer just about the entertainment element, but also about the historical value and informational power of visual imagery. Following Riis's magic lantern slide spectacles and his contributions to the rich history of journalism and sociology, in the 1920s "documentary" film newsreels were becoming part of new journalistic practices much later to also be seen in television.

A 1927 *Los Angeles Times* article called them "current event films" and recognized the cameraperson as a "newsreel photographer." Notably, the production technique of the newsreels was similar to that of a photographer employing lantern slides to exhibit his photographs. "The newsreel photographer must take himself and his camera to the actual scene of the event, make his pictures, and then carry or ship his film to the central laboratory. Here, prints are made in sufficient numbers to supply each theater showing the newsreel" (Newsreel History Cited: Nickelodeons and Dime Museums Sixteen Years Ago Were Forerunners of Current Event Films, 1927).

And much like Riis's picture spectacle, theaters would arrange those slides and present them to audiences. Still, these showings did not necessarily resemble the characteristics of a true social documentary, as much as Riis's rhetoric did during his

photo exhibitions, but they serve to help advance the argument that the genre holds a solid place in journalism history.

In order to further analyze the changes in journalism as an institution and to more successfully place Riis's visual social documentary in the field, one must consider the motivation behind his work and its interpretation in context with the social conditions of the era, or social discourse. A closer look at his photographic work informs about the ideology and the way social differences were constructed and interpreted during his time. Weintraub (2009) outlines this approach as one precisely pertinent to the study of society. "Ideology is powerful because it represents particular beliefs and values as normal, ordinary, and inevitable," he writes. "Ideology is thus, for the most part, unseen and unacknowledged ... most Americans go through their daily lives never questioning the basic premises of social life" (p. 212). This statement is particularly relevant to Riis's work, because his efforts were intended to question ideology, awaken society, and instill the belief that the immigrant life in the New York's tenements should not be part of the "inevitable."

This notion rests at the core of progressive historians' approach to studying media and in order to support the connection between documentary film and Riis's social documentary, one must begin precisely by examining Riis's contemporaries, the Gilded Age society, from a progressive school of thought, or that of media's existence for the purpose of social reform. Following the years of the American Civil War, high birth and immigration rates caused the nation's population to double in the short space of two decades — between 1870 and 1890 (Kobre, 1969). At the time, the economy rapidly expanded with the growth of the industrial system and triggered major changes in social

life, politics, and the press' practices. Society was enchanted by new inventions and numerous technological innovations: from transportation — expansion of the railroad system, to communication — growth of telegraph use and popularization of pictorial journalism.

Historically, the purpose of newspapers and magazines has been to report for and about society. With the rise of immigration, expansion of urban life, and introduction of new technologies, it had only been natural to begin the visual documentation of society, with the latter undoubtedly shaping the changing journalistic practices. When it comes to pictorial or illustrated journalism, the Gilded Age can be considered as one of the key periods in media history from both developmental and progressive historians' perspective. Around the same time, Riis began taking interest in exposing the lower class and the immigrant issues, and he was not alone. Various publications were also targeting the problem of the Lower Manhattan's slums, yet Riis had a more innovative approach to exposing the issues at hand.

In *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America*, social historian Joshua Brown (2002) best describes the changes in journalism and American print culture as he denotes that illustrated periodicals such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly* broke ground in the field. "A visual medium that at a first glance had appeared superficial and reliant on transparent class, ethnic, and racial stereotypes, that seemed to preserve dominant expressions of power," he writes, "turned out to encompass differing interpretations and to change over time" (p. 2).

The growing coverage of poverty and social issues reflect on the notion that the illustrated press was becoming a powerful journalistic instrument and pictorial representations of society influenced both the supply and the demand within the industry. In this sense, viewing the era through a progressive lens can further inform about the changes in journalistic practices as the press at the time was also beginning to serve as a tool for reform. Riis's documentary photography, and later film, can and should be studied in a similar fashion. After all, progressive historians focused on illuminating the efforts of particular individuals in addressing the need for reform, they stood behind the idea that the purpose of the press was indeed to fight on the side of the masses and embark on a crusade for liberal, social, and economic causes.

Frank Leslie's and other pictorial publications began to publish images that revealed poverty and tenement life as early as the 1860s. "Invariably accompanied by descriptions of artists-reporters' journeys into darkness ... these engravings portrayed enduring social types, their faces and bodies diagrams of characterological failure, their lives passed in dark, crowded conditions that were the antithesis of the domestic ideal," Brown wrote (p. 87). Examples of such pictures include a *Frank Leslie's* 1882 engraving titled "New York City: Presentation of Bibles to Destitute Children, on their Departure, January 3rd, for Homes Provided for Them by Mrs. John Jacob Astor" (see Image 1) and *Harper's Weekly's* 1883 engraving "Homes of the Poor" (see Image 2) (Prints Old and Rare – Poverty Page).

Precisely the economic conditions during that time set the stage for photographers and reformers like Riis to expand upon the already forming social documentary genre in media as a whole. Riis's images were initially only published in the form of wood

engravings or blurry halftones, and their mass distribution was limited by the lack of technology. He had to find a more effective way to spread the word and to convey the power of the visual image — the magic lantern. His innovative approach as a photographer and a journalist is a prime example for the origins of the social documentary genre in visual media. The same also marked the beginning of a new approach to reporting and those who did not rely on visuals had to “visualize” it for their audiences through words. Muckraking was born.



Image 1. New York City: Presentation of Bibles to Destitute Children, on their Departure January 3rd, for Homes Provided For Them by Mrs. John Jacob Astor, (1882). *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

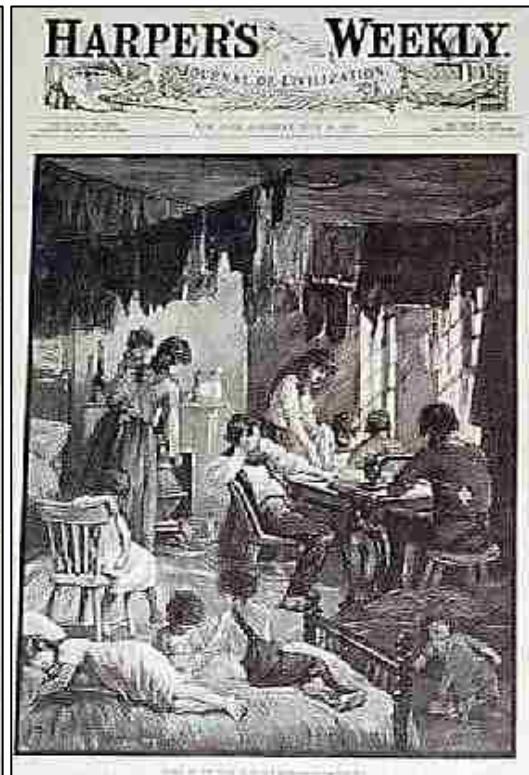


Image 2. Homes of the Poor, *Harper's Weekly*. 1883.

Progressive historians who have focused on the ways individuals addressed economic and social issues play a unique role in understanding the Mulberry Bend's tenement housing issues and in turn, Riis's biography and his role as a leading muckraker, social documentarian, and reformer. Others exposed the tenement problems he had devoted his life to through various means of communication, however the expositions have not been so successful despite journalistic efforts over the span of several decades. Here, a progressive approach can best convey the role of the muckrakers' crusade for liberal, social, and economic causes, and in turn, can further support the effects of Riis's innovative social documentary style as a journalistic tool. Both, the former and the latter are very much evident in the realm of documentary film and filmmakers' practices too.

In order to understand the ideology of not only the Gilded Age society, but Riis as a muckraker and a reformer, too, one must consider the ideas and ideals of that particular generation of journalists and the way they provoked both thought and action. In the 1968 volume *The Muckrakers and American Society*, history scholar Herbert Shapiro introduced the multi-author volume stating that journalists of the time have had a great impact on influencing the nation's politics and culture while serving public interest. "American journalism has its reform tradition, its heritage of writers who have sought to make the promise of democracy a living reality," Shapiro wrote. Though he suggested that the muckrakers were mostly concerned with social problems and only a few related to public life, his commentary also advances the idea that the press has been and can be of utmost importance when it comes to social awareness, government affairs, and policy change. The same is true for media's role in influencing the ideology of society and media practitioners alike.

The responsibility of the press to be the government watchdog became more evident during the early 1900s precisely when the investigative reporting movement, known as muckraking, began to take shape. Theodore Roosevelt who coined the term “muckraker” supported the idea of a “checking” function of the press for the health of society. “There should be relentless exposure of and attack upon every evil man, whether politician or businessman, every evil practice, whether in politics, in business or in social life,” the Progressive president had stated (Shapiro, 1968). In part, this also is one of the primary elements of the documentary logic as the visual “documenting” of society can serve as the “checking” and eventually, exposure of social issues.

From a journalistic standpoint, here it is important to establish the connection between the leading muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Jacob Riis himself, by suggesting that they all, as both individuals and as journalists, shared a few common ideals — the healing of social ills through reform efforts, while at the same time contributing to a progressive ideology. Through their work and the press, they strived to do so in order to trigger social change and political reform in the name of democracy and equal opportunity. However, Riis’ unique use of photography and visual documentary reporting style set him apart from the forerunners of muckraking.

Reporter and social commentator Walter Lippmann who studied the effects of muckraking discussed some of the common themes of the movement in the first chapter of his 1914 volume *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. His commentary delved into a discussion about corruption in American politics and he suggested that when muckraking developed, the standards of public life began being applicable to the business world, too (p. 5). Because of the work of the muckrakers, the

two areas can be viewed as directly intertwined since politics and the adoption of laws and policies aimed at the protection of business were becoming of concern to society.

As a leading figure among the muckrakers, Riis successfully broke ground in the field of investigative journalism. He shared the ideological sympathies and intense interest in economic issues with other muckrakers of the time, but unlike them he was not interested in merely exposing crooked politicians and businessmen — his life purpose was to awaken the consciousness of the same in order to make a social reform.

The credibility of media at the time along with the respect of journalists like Riis were both taken in higher regard. Furthermore, visuals printed in the press and shown through the more novel at the time “moving pictures” fashion appear to have had a greater impact on society. Riis’s magic lantern slide exhibitions coupled with his powerful rhetoric in a moving pictures fashion along with illustrated books and first-account tales have proven to be gaining more and more popularity paving the way even further for the visual social documentary in journalism history. It was an innovative approach to storytelling — an early form of documentary film.

By 1888, the New York *Sun* had published twelve drawings from Riis’s photographs with an article titled *Flashes from the Slums*. It featured twelve illustrations drawn from Riis’s photographs including portrayals of lodging houses, homeless children, crime, and poverty. Riis’s message however was not clearly understood because the text accompanying the article served just as a mere description of what was in each illustration along with commentary about Riis’s picture-taking techniques with little or no mention of the larger issue at hand. “The adventures of the picture-taking party were interesting and somewhat amusing. Their night pictures were faithful and characteristic

being mostly snap shots and surprises. In the daytime they could not altogether avoid having their object known and struggle as they might against it ...” (Flashes from the Slums, 1888).

In another segment the article stated “another outcropping of the benevolent purpose of Mr. Riis on behalf of the boys is his showing of a touching picture of street Arabs in sleeping quarters which it must have taken a hunt to discover” (Flashes from the Slums, 1888). This statement can be interpreted more readily as an appraisal of Riis’s efforts as a compassionate, and perhaps even very talented photographer, yet the article fails to recognize the social ills of poverty and homelessness Riis was trying to expose.

By that time, it becomes clear Riis might have actually realized that the expensive image reproduction was not the only reason his photographs were not being published. “For more than a year I had knocked at the doors of the various magazine editors with my pictures, proposing to tell them how the other half lived, but no one wanted to know,” Riis wrote (1901). Publishing was clearly growing as a business rather than a service to society.

His work was being heavily viewed from an art perspective rather than as means to convey a message to society too so he took on another approach — social documentary through magic lantern slide exhibitions. His 1900 piece “The Story of the Slum: A Look at the Tomorrow in New York” published in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* however helped advance his arguments as a couple of his images were published hand-in-hand with his personal account of the tenement conditions (see Image 3). Newspapermen were finally beginning to acknowledge the importance of his work.

APRIL 8, 1900—SIXTY-EIGHT PAGES.



THE STORY OF THE SLUM — PART V. A LOOK AT THE TOMORROW IN NEW YORK

BY JACOB A. RIIS. AUTHOR OF "HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES."



TONY, THE BOY OF THE STREETS.

OTHER SPECIALS FOR THE CHICAGO

W HEN I was in New York, I saw the streets of the city, and I saw the people who lived in the slums. I saw the children who were playing in the streets, and I saw the men who were drinking in the saloons. I saw the women who were washing clothes in the tenements, and I saw the old people who were living in the garrets. I saw the poverty and the misery, and I saw the hope and the courage. I saw the struggle for life, and I saw the triumph of the human spirit.

It was a strange and wonderful world, and it was a world that I had never seen before. I had heard of the slums, but I had never seen them. I had heard of the poverty, but I had never felt it. I had heard of the misery, but I had never known it. Now I had seen it all, and now I knew what it was like.

I had seen the children who were playing in the streets, and I had seen the men who were drinking in the saloons. I had seen the women who were washing clothes in the tenements, and I had seen the old people who were living in the garrets. I had seen the poverty and the misery, and I had seen the hope and the courage. I had seen the struggle for life, and I had seen the triumph of the human spirit.



TONY'S HOME IN THE SLUMS OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.



THE STREET THAT IS TONY'S ONLY PLAYGROUND.

"Yes, of course, I am a boy of the streets," said Tony. "I have been here since I was born. I have seen all the things that you have seen, and I have done all the things that you have done. I have seen the men who were drinking in the saloons, and I have seen the women who were washing clothes in the tenements. I have seen the old people who were living in the garrets, and I have seen the children who were playing in the streets. I have seen the poverty and the misery, and I have seen the hope and the courage. I have seen the struggle for life, and I have seen the triumph of the human spirit."

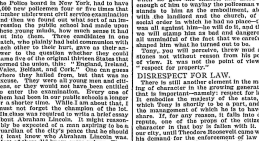
EXAMPLES OF IGNORANCE

It is not always that the poor are ignorant. There are many who are intelligent and who are capable of doing good. But there are many who are ignorant and who are incapable of doing good. These are the examples of ignorance that I saw in New York.

I saw the men who were drinking in the saloons, and I saw the women who were washing clothes in the tenements. I saw the old people who were living in the garrets, and I saw the children who were playing in the streets. I saw the poverty and the misery, and I saw the hope and the courage. I saw the struggle for life, and I saw the triumph of the human spirit.

WHAT THE STREETS HAVE DONE FOR THE BOY

FROM PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY ROGUES GALLERY.



BOTTLE ALLEY—WHERE THE GANG TRIVES.

There were men who were drinking in the saloons, and there were women who were washing clothes in the tenements. There were old people who were living in the garrets, and there were children who were playing in the streets. There was poverty and misery, and there was hope and courage. There was a struggle for life, and there was a triumph of the human spirit.

HERBERT SCORER

"I have seen the men who were drinking in the saloons, and I have seen the women who were washing clothes in the tenements. I have seen the old people who were living in the garrets, and I have seen the children who were playing in the streets. I have seen the poverty and the misery, and I have seen the hope and the courage. I have seen the struggle for life, and I have seen the triumph of the human spirit."

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Image 3. The Story of the Slum Part V: A Look at the Tomorrow in New York City. April 8, 1900. The Chicago Sunday Tribune. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

In *Development of American Journalism*, Kobre (1969) noted a key idea that best conveys the effects of the popularization of the pictorial press, and later the true impact of Riis's work during the Gilded Age. The author noted that with the ability of visuals to rapidly satisfy the senses of a news-hungry city dweller looking to escape the dullness of the factory or office and be entertained, there was an emergence of psychological changes affecting both society and media. "[The city dweller] looked for something novel, something new, some change," Kobre wrote (p. 356).

Later, in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, historian Alan Trachtenberg (1982) makes a similar observation. He points out that the desire for entertainment and spectacles grew exponentially during the late nineteenth century. Technological inventions such as faster printing presses, telephone, typewriter, mechanical typesetters, and photo engraving machines enhanced the information dissemination process (p. 123). With increasing competition and the rapidly expanding technologies, the Gilded Age society was beginning to crave new media experiences and the same was in turn responsible for changing human relationships. "In technologies and communication," Trachtenberg writes, "vicarious experiences began to erode direct physical experiences of the world. Viewing and looking at representations, words and images, city people found themselves addressed more often as passive spectators than as active participants" (p. 122).

Riis's idea was quite the opposite. Through sensational, yet truthful images and rhetoric, as a true progressive, he wanted to awaken that passive audience and to engage society in activism and the democratic process. "Riis's purpose is to make you see it, see and touch it, as a personal event — though artfully distanced and mediated by his own

picturing” (Trachtenberg, 1982). His magic lantern presentations had aimed to demonstrate that the documenting of social conditions and the open and honest social commentary through the means of media and technology was not just the right approach, but one of the more effective ways to produce change within the society itself, too.

Indeed, visual media like photography, magic lantern slide exhibitions, and “moving pictures” were beginning to make a notable impact on society, its ideology, and the practices of journalists and publishers alike. In this regards, Developmental historians who have focused on the survey of those individuals who have contributed to media progress, play a unique role in understanding nineteenth-century visual media and Riis’s impact as a journalist who had devoted his life and work to the Mulberry Bend immigrants.

In her famous volume *On Photography*, writer and critic Susan Sontag (1976) rightfully noted that capturing the essence of things — or objects or people — is a key aspect of photography. Her idea of keeping the status quo unchanged for as long as it takes to get a “good” picture essentially defines the discipline as an act of non-intervention (p. 12). In support of this argument Sontag (1976) also claimed that it is the photographer’s role to capture those “things” undisturbed and in their true light in order to allow the viewer to receive the image in its entirely factual nature.

In the same sense, and much like documentary filmmakers, Riis’s photographs and public exhibitions portray “things” that he took personal interest in, told human stories, and engaged his audience while continuing to urge social reform. Riis himself admitted that for the photographer, the crusade for discovery was of the greatest interest and since his writing had no impression on audiences, he took it upon himself to learn the

craft. “I started out to tell how I came to be a photographer, and here I am, off to the subject of philanthropy and social settlements” (Riis, 1959). Both features are quite characteristic of the social documentary genre and relevant to the sociological aspect of Riis’s work.

Riis also successfully employed his skills as an ethnographer and a social researcher — two very important aspects that are often present in documentary films. Wagner (2004) proposed that the success of some documentarians in reaching broader audiences and making an impact is grounded precisely in their efforts to represent their work as the outcome of a personal journey (p. 1499). Similarly, Riis’s personable and self-reflexive approach had led to insight, understanding and ultimately, to social reform.

Furthermore, as s a credible ethnographer, Riis understood society and its needs and advocated for reform precisely through visual media. In order to contribute to the developmental and progressive interpretations of the state of media during the Gilded Age it is important to study the social context in which Riis worked, how he presented his photographs in print and through the means of magic lantern presentation, and the way his audience viewed and understood his photographs. The interpretation of his work and its impact is relative to the general understanding of visual documentaries, their content, practice, and distribution. Utilizing Bill Nichols’ (1991) documentary modes further helps illuminate the connection between Riis’s public slide exhibitions and the way history of documentary may be viewed in contemporary terms.

In his book *Film: An Introduction*, dramatic literature and film studies scholar William H. Phillips (2002), defines documentary film as a visual medium that represents its subjects in ways viewers are intended to accept them, as a fact, and not a product of

someone's imagination. He explains how a documentary filmmaker's work is grounded in communicative insights, offering an understanding or improved social, political, or economic conditions (Phillips, 2002). As a reformer, Riis accomplished all of the above in both print media and public exhibitions.

A prime example of his visual documentary, though presented in print, is his famous 1890 volume *How the Other Half Lives*. The book included seventeen half-tone images of a rather poor quality and nineteen photographs shown in drawings made from them (Newhall, 1982). It was a successful effort because of his magic lantern slide presentations. Among the listeners and viewers at one of his illustrated lectures was the editor of the highly influential *Scribner's Magazine*. He was so moved by the story of "bitter poverty, of landlord's greed, of sweatshop slavery, of darkness and squalor and misery" that he asked Riis to submit an article with pictures (Riis, 1901). The story titled "How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements" appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* at Christmas 1889, a year before the book was published. It was the first time his photographs appeared in a national publication (see Image 4). In May of 1892, *Scribner's* published another article by Riis, which turned into a book as well, *The Children of the Poor*.

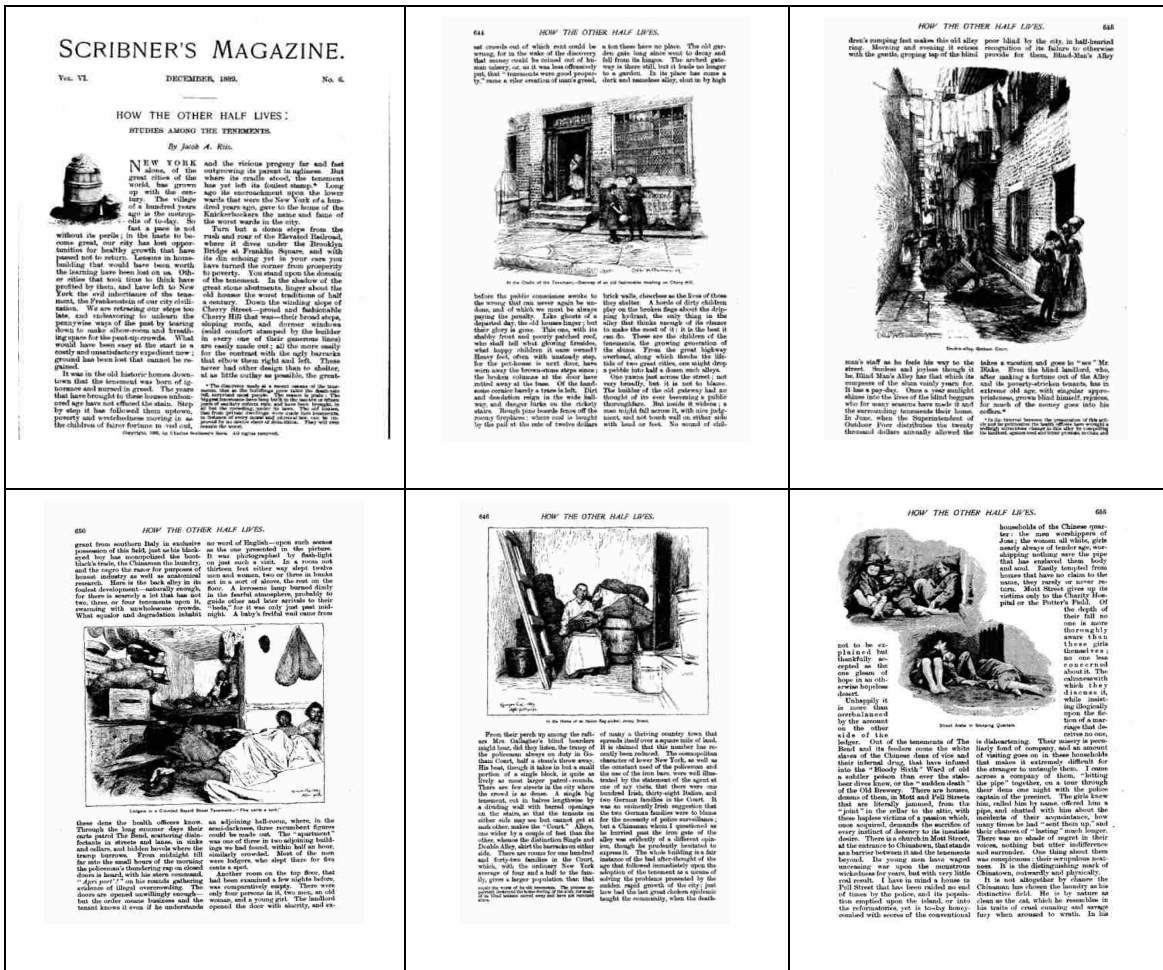


Image 4. How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements. Scribner's Magazine, December 1889. Cornell University Library [online].

In the next few years, the photographer and reformer grew in popularity. He shared his images and stories at numerous public projections in hope to raise awareness about the poor living conditions of New York's immigrant population. Riis's projected images were always accompanied by his own narration based on the drama he had experienced first-hand while living in the streets. Like a true documentarian, he revealed his personal thoughts and passion while "touring" the poverty-ridden Mulberry Bend area.

Sometimes they ask me. What is all this about, with your “infant slaughter” in the tenements? The children are bright and strong to look at ... A doctor once ... said, “It is a clear case of the survival of the fittest. Only those who are strong as cattle can ever stand it.” Those who are sick or dying you do not see ... Come with me ... when those stony streets are like fiery furnaces, and see those mothers walking up and down the pavements with their little babies ... and hear the feeble wails of those little ones! Here is one of them, an Italian baby in its swaddling clothes. You have seen how they wrap them around and around until you can almost stand them on either end, and they won’t bend, so tightly are they bound. (Riis illustrated lecture/Alland, Sr. 1974)

Narrations such as the above served Riis as the backdrop to his magic lantern presentations. In documentary film terms, they closely resemble what Nichols (1991) would call *expository* and *reflexive* modes of representation. The former serves to raise ethical issues and speaks objectively and persuasively to the audience. “Expository texts take shape around commentary directed toward the viewer, images serve as illustration or counterpoint,” Nichols writes (p. 34). The latter, in Nichols’ (1991) words, functions as the filmmaker (or lecturer in this case) engages in a self-reflection and metacommentary about the world (p. 56). “The reflexive mode of representation gives emphasis to the encounter between the filmmaker and the viewer rather than filmmaker and subject” (Nichols, 1991). This particular mode perhaps best describes Riis’s approach both, at times of his magic lantern presentations and his entire body of work during his quest for social awareness.

The following sample of images is representative of what Riis had included in his public slide exhibitions and had accompanied his interaction with his viewers (see Images 5 through 13). The images portray mothers and their children living in disease-ridden tenements, homeless children (Street Arabs) sleeping in street ditches, police lodging room inhabitants treated as criminals, and tramps living in dumps among garbage and dirt.

The lives of the immigrants in New York's abominable Five Points area resembled nothing else but a life of squalor and misery. The images appear voyeuristic and lack intimacy, once again conveying the treatment of these individuals as non-existent members of society, unwelcome, and almost removed. Even the captions naming the locales where those individuals slept "sleeping quarters" are degrading and dehumanizing. Riis's personal vision and experiences were artfully translated onto each photograph and interwoven in each caption too.

Upon the emergence of photography in general, such expressive content was not necessarily taken into consideration, but as its popularity grew, the craft was seen less as a mirror of the world and more as an expression of a particular photographic vision (Weintraub, 2009). The expressive content and compositional factors play essential roles as in order for a subject to be represented as truthfully as possible the photographer is responsible to ensure the social context of the event or situation is present. The expressive content, or the "evocation in writing of the 'feel' of an image" and its accompanying narrative, much like in documentary film, are among some of the most important elements contributing to the understanding of what that image truly represents.

It dictates the way the audience perceives and interprets it, helps introduce and reinforce an existing social reality, and helps tell a history (Rose, 2007).

Riis's photographs primarily convey the poverty-ridden living conditions of the slums because the subjects within the frame are in the distance. They all appear emotionless and engulfed by their harsh surrounding, suggesting they were viewed as rather insignificant members of society. As a talented social documentarian, Riis had visually captured the lives of these individuals and had brought the bitter reality of their existence to his audience's attention in search for social reform. The same is true for a documentary filmmaker who, according to the expository mode description, also "frequently builds a sense of dramatic involvement around the need for solution" (Nichols, 1991).



Image 5. In the home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Image 6. Yard in Jersey Street (now gone) where Italians lived in the then worst slums. ca. 1897. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Image 7. Scene on the roof of the Barracks (no. 116), naked children. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Image 8. Police Station Lodging Room 7. Women's lodging room in West 47th Street Station. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Image 9. Police Station Lodgers 8. An ancient women lodger in Eldridge Street Station. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].

Riis had photographed and talked passionately about the people of the slums. Among them were the homeless children sleeping on the sidewalks: “They are to be found all over the city, these Street Arabs where the neighborhood offers a chance of picking up a living in the daytime and of ‘turning in’ at night with a promise of security from surprise,” he wrote. “In warm weather a truck in the street, a convenient out-house, or a dug out in a hay-barge at wharf make good bunks” (Riis, 1890/2012).



Image 10. Street Arabs — night, Boys in sleeping quarter.
ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Image 11. Street Arabs in sleeping quarters.
ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].

In another passage, he described a tramp he had met along the way. “Of the tough the tramp doctrine that the world owes him a living makes a thief; of the tramp a coward. Numbers only make him bold unless he has to do with defenseless women,” Riis wrote. “A man goes from his first night’s sleep on the hard slab of a police station lodging room to a deck-hand’s berth on an ongoing steamer, to the recruiting office, to any work that is honest, or he goes “to the devil or the dive, same thing,’ says my friend the Sergeant, who knows” (Riis, 1890/2012).



Image 12. Under the Dump at West 47th Street.
Ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].

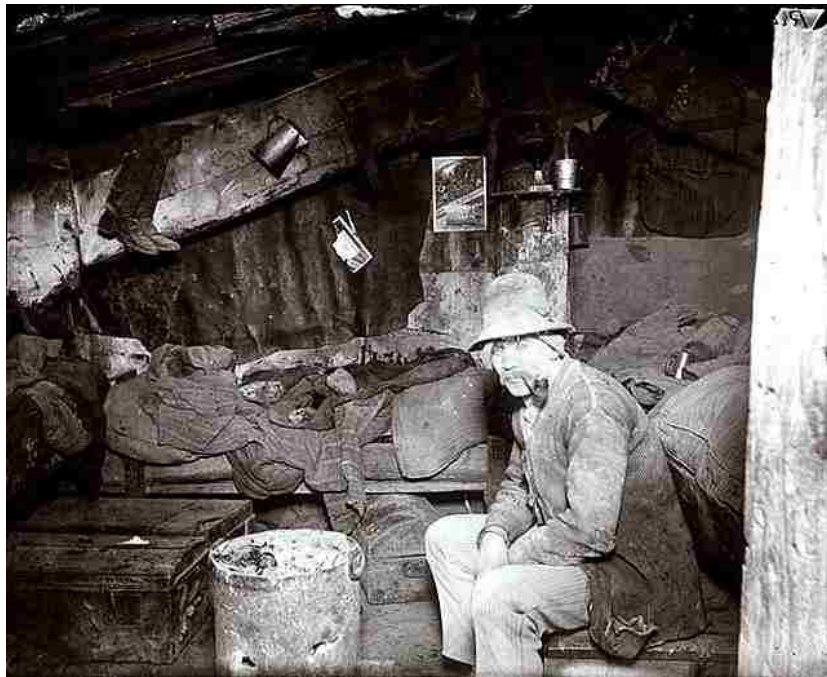


Image 13: In sleeping quarters — Rivington Street Dump.
ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].

Although the above is an excerpt from Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* and not an illustrated lecture, one can agree that his writings, photographs, and slide presentations were inseparable elements of his social documentary work. In this sense, here can be noted that Riis also employed what Nichols (1991) calls an *interactive* documentary mode. Nichols (1991) describes it as a way of showcasing documentary work through testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration. He suggests that textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited to participate, in this case Riis as an immigrant himself, and their comments and responses provide a central part of a film's argument (p. 44).

The discourse analysis of Riis's images, writings, and lectures was intended to visually depict the social reality of New York's desolate Mulberry Bend area during the Gilded Age and to demonstrate Riis's approach in investigating and documenting the social issues at hand. It was a reality of struggle for immigrants – a powerless mass of the society living a savage-like life in dirt, chaos, and misery. There were no power relationships at the time, or at least none that the photographs alone can convey. The immigrants of New York were practically non-existent until enough was written about them in media and their stories were told and portraits were shown during Riis's public magic lantern slide exhibitions. And Riis was closer to understanding these people than most members of society because he, after all, had been one of them, too.

By employing crafty captions, powerful rhetoric while projecting his slides on the large screen and publishing personal stories, Riis helped his audience gain an understanding of the larger societal issues. As the “director” of his spectacle, he had the power of dictating the way his stories would unfold; from arranging the images in a

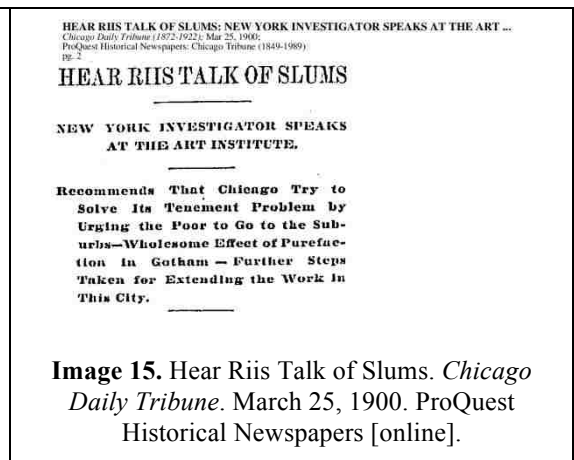
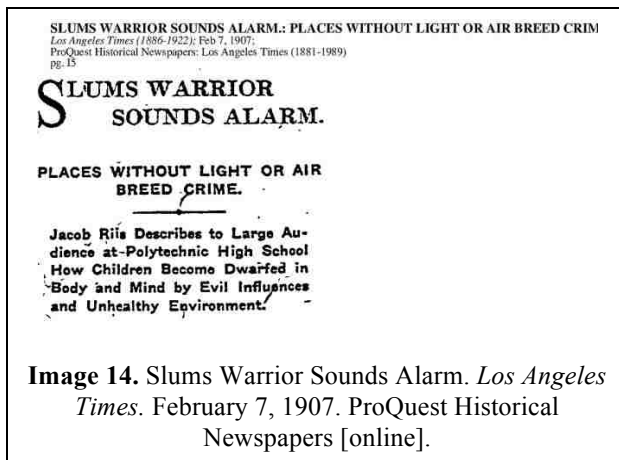
specific sequence and adding powerful caption text to each image (editing in film) to a heart full talk about his personal encounters in the very same world he was depicting.

Here is where Nichols' (1991) *observational* mode comes into play. Documentary films constructed under this mode rely on editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time. Though he suggests that in its purest form, commentaries and the involvement of the film director are completely eschewed, and arguably Riis's approach deviates from that definition, nevertheless the latter also intersects with the mode because of a shared ethnographic nature. In this sense, when transporting the mind back to the time of Riis's illustrated lectures, one can view the photographer as both the director and the actor in the film since Riis himself has been part of the desolate immigrant population of New York's Mulberry Bend.

Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonation, inflection, and accents that give a spoken language its "grain" and that distinguish one native speaker from another (Nichols, 1991).

A typical documentary film includes informative language, narration, title cards, or in this instance image caption, personal accounts, signs, or a combination of sources" (Philips, 2002). These words and artifacts, much like in Riis's earlier photography work and slide exhibitions, are effectively used to persuade the audience of the truthfulness of the presentation. Riis's illustrated lectures were also noted in daily newspapers, posters, and flyers in a manner similar to the promotion of films (see Images 14 and 15).

In 1892, *The Washington Post* had posted an announcement about an upcoming lecture. The happening was two years after the publication of *How the Other Half Lives* and by that time society was well aware of New York’s tenement issues. “The lecture will be illustrated and the sad story of ‘How the other half lives’ will be graphically told,” read the article. “Mr. Riis is an attractive, magnetic speaker. The subject is one that interests every thoughtful student of social problems” (*How the Other Half Lives*, 1892). Similar announcements were beginning to appear in newspapers nation-wide too.



Audiences were finally beginning to understand and appreciate Riis’s social work, publishers were beginning to recognize the need for reform and support his efforts. In 1900, the *New York Times* stated that every New Yorker knew about the 10-year war against the filth and crime in the worst of New York’s slums “thanks, in an appreciable extend, indeed, to Mr. Jacob A. Riis’s untiring efforts to convince them” (*Battles With Slums: Jacob Riis’s Account of a Ten Years’ war and Its Results*, 1900).

Only a few years later, on April 3, 1902 *The Washington Post* recognized Riis not only as a journalist and a good citizen, but also as a noble crusader in the name of the

greater good, one who refused positions and profit, remaining a hard-working newspaperman. The article titled “Governorship for Jacob Riis: One of the Occasions on Which the Office Seeks the Man,” implies the idea that Riis had not only earned the admiration of the readers, but that of government powers, too.

T. D. A. Cockrell also noted his sociological approach in a 1903 review of Riis’s *Battle with the Slum* book published in *The Dial: a Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information*. In his article, Cockrell provided an in-depth commentary about Riis’s success as an ethnographer and a social worker, both largely resulting from Riis’s photography, slide exhibition, lecturing, and writings combined and all closely related to visual social documentary practices.

Mr. Riis does not claim to be a sociologist, but the logical outcome of his work is to enable every individual to take the proper place in the world’s work — indeed in the world’s play also. This, at all events, is the ‘unalienable right’ of each member of democracy, and the no less inalienable need of that democracy itself.

(Sociology: Practical and Theoretical, 1903)

Riis’s four-page flyer advertising the essence of his work in a way of a promotional material included reviews and commentaries from other publications, too (see Image 16).

In one paragraph, the *Manchester Union* claimed the famous New Yorker was termed “the most useful citizen” by President Roosevelt. In another segment, the *Lewiston Journal* advertised an upcoming lecture that would include “pictures that speak.”

Furthermore, the introduction of Riis stated, “The moment Riis grasps you firmly by the arm, looks deep into your eyes and begins to talk, you see why he succeeded in what he undertook.” Another example of the way his work was distributed similarly to the way

Though his images and magic lantern slides were powerful visual tools, they likely may not have been sufficient to trigger an outcry in society had there not been Riis's narrative and rhetoric that accompanied all of his efforts. A late 1800s scrapbook entry of a formal complaint to the Health Board, denoted in his 1901 volume *The Making of an American*, depicted the contents of the above images and the need for reform best. It also served to describe the relationship, or lack thereof, between the lower immigrant class "living" in the Mulberry Bend and that of "the other half" of society.

The Bend is a mass of wreck, a dumping-ground for all manner of filth from the surrounding tenements. The Street-cleaning Department has no jurisdiction over it, and the Park Department, in charge of which it is, exercises none. The numerous old cellars are a source of danger to the children that swarm over the block. Water stagnating in the holes will shortly add the peril of epidemic disease. Such a condition as that now prevailing in this block, with its dense surrounding population, would not be tolerated by your department for a single day if on private property (p. 180).

Nichols (1991) strengthens this idea in terms of documentary's dimensions. "Images are mysterious imitations of the very thing that written language can demystify, make into an object of knowledge, and render available for productive purposes," he wrote. "At best images may illustrate a point that must finally return to words for its meaning or implications. Documentary film has kinship with those nonfictional systems" (p. 3).

From a progressive point of view, Riis has done his part in both documentary and journalism history clearly demonstrating that the press, and media as a whole, can and should be viewed as instruments for reform. Riis's photographs and the interpretation of

the accompanying ideology, context, and knowledge-power relationships within society during the Gilded Age depicted in them would further strengthen the above idea as well as more closely connect Riis's social documentary still images of the past to the social documentary moving pictures of the future.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Riis's photography was largely inspired by his own experiences as an immigrant, and the study of his work in this context can further address the way documentary is defined today. This approach has its roots precisely in the mixture of ideology, technology, and social awareness that grew from Riis's work and inspired others to visually document social issues. But how effective is the visual social documentary as an approach to social criticism and reform in more recent decades?

While through *How the Other Half Lives* Riis advocated for the people who were close to him and shared experiences similar to his own, in *American Pictures: A Personal Journey Through the American Underclass*, another photographer, Jacob Holdt immersed himself in the American nation and the social issues of the 1970s. Almost a century after his fellow Danish-born predecessor began his documentary photography work to urge social reform, Holdt went on his own journey getting to know a different half. The subjects this photographer focused on were not the immigrants, but the underprivileged Americans, who were not only victims of poverty and inequality, but also of racism.

Holdt travelled across America witnessing the harsh contrasting reality between the upper and lower classes. He had sent many letters about these people to his family back in Denmark, but just like Riis, he felt his words were not sufficient to describe the 1970s American reality so he purchased a used Kodak camera. Although he spoke of his photography efforts at the time as a secondary preoccupation he acknowledged that the

same helped him keep “a kind of a diary to remember the people who came to mean something” to him (Holdt, 1985).

American Pictures is a record of Holdt’s travels and experiences in a country ridden with racism, oppression, inequality, poverty, and struggle for survival. Like Riis, his goal was to send a message to the world—there is need for social change. He even began his Foreword with a quote from a book he had picked up in 1975 in a San Francisco bookstore. “We know now that there is no way out,” the quote read, “that the system that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay, a storm-center of our civilization” (p. 3). The book Holdt borrowed the passage from was no other, but Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*.

Taking a closer look at Holdt’s *American Pictures* suggests that both, documentary photography and film, construct specific views of the social world that could be highly subjective, yet unrehearsed and truthful depictions of social issues and the personal journeys of the authors and their subjects. The similarity in the images, narratives, and presentation styles of Riis and Holdt serve as examples of the experiences of two foreigners who were in search for their own identity and justice for the underprivileged while depicting a somewhat different America—the America of the “other half.”

They accumulated their body of work almost a century apart from each other with the goal to provide visual records of their personal experiences and to urge social reform. Their images are similar in as many ways as they are different, yet they represent the photographers’ honest attempts to enlighten their audience about societal issues in America. Such documentation of experiences and creation of social reality can give

people a way to think about themselves and their relationship with others and this approach is rooted solidly in the heart of the documentary tradition (Weintraub, 2009).

Perhaps one of the more notable differences between their photography is the image composition in terms of proximity to the subject within the frame. The same was dictated by the available technology at the time of image production. The 1800s heavy glass plates, cameras, and explosive flash prevented Riis from getting closer to his subjects, while Holdt's lightweight Kodak camera allowed him to be an unobtrusive observer in his subjects' lives resulting in a subtle form of surveillance and more intimate portrayals. His relationship with his subjects is also evident in the first-person narrative.

In a sense, both Riis and Holdt have conducted empirical anthropological surveys of social groups, and their validity should not be dismissed on the basis of subjectivity. Their images, which were taken almost a century apart, not only depict the photographers' struggles as they exposed and/or became victims of poverty, inequality, and racism, but also reinforce the importance of social documentary in visual media, subjective or not, and its role as an agent of social change.

The New York Times journalist Andrea Elliott's (2013) work can be viewed in a similar, but more contemporary terms: from both, a technological and an audience perspective. Elliott, an investigative reporter for *The Times*, worked with photographer Ruth Fremson to capture the life of a homeless girl and her family living on the streets of New York City. In a way, *Invisible Child. Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life* is the twenty-first century's voice of Jacob Riis. The series was published in the online version of *The Times* and similarly to Riis's and Holdt's work, combines powerful narrative, imagery, and even video footage to raise awareness of the now centuries-long

social ill of poverty and homelessness in New York. Indeed, the narrative itself is very much like Riis's lively depictions of the tenements, the imagery – a close resemblance of Holdt's photography of black America. "She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets," Elliot (2013) begins her story. "A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate," she writes (Invisible Child, 2013).

The author presents her findings online, in what appears to be a photographic essay or a book. Just like Riis, Elliott (2013) had gathered the materials for her narrative from city and state inspection reports, police records, city agencies, and interviews with shelter residents. The social documentary value of her work stems from the first-hand investigative reporting style, rhetoric, and the use of visual imagery to tell Dasani's story (Invisible Child, 2013).

Looking at the work of Riis, Holdt, and Elliott across the span of three centuries from a journalistic lens can help inform about the evolution of the genre, in both photography and film. It further highlights the relationship between technology and social awareness and demonstrates that the visual social documentary holds a strong place precisely in the field of journalism. What makes Riis's work unique and determines the same should be considered as a precursor to documentary film, however, is the fact that the earliest documentary films, though still intended to portray unrehearsed and truthful moments in time, revolved primarily around the notion to entertain and/or educate.

Some of the first documentary efforts, not including the Lumière brothers' work, date back to the early 1900s and were mostly focused the city, land, and the individual. Photographer Edward Curtis and Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov foreshadowed the newsreels and Robert Flaherty's 1926 ethnographic film *Moana* indirectly contributed to the introduction of the term "documentary" (Chronology of Documentary History, p. 4) Yet, neither of these individuals' undeniable contributions resemble the social documentary discussed in this thesis.

Decades after Riis's pioneering work, the Depression era signaled a shift in the film industry. It was a period during which newsreel coverage of poverty and social protest was limited by the Hoover Administration (Davidson, 1983). In *Depression America and the Rise of the Social Documentary Film*, film scholar David Davidson (1983) denoted that amateur filmmakers were outraged by this neglect and sought to document the social conditions nonetheless. Between 1931 and 1935 filmmakers Leo Seltzer, Lester Balog, and Robert Del Duca produced a series of silent short films and newsreels documenting the hungry and unemployed. These films were later named to be the first social documentary films (p. 70). Similarly to Riis's work, the content of the films was dictated by the social and political climates of the country and although silent, the footage closely resembled Riis's approach too. "Perhaps [the documentarians'] commitment to ideals took precedence over their powers of observation," Davidson writes. "If so the ideologue overpowered the documentarian, even to the point of placing into question the validity of documenting actuality when instead one could document — or at least dramatize — ideas themselves" (p. 79).

In these terms, the historical context and ideology of the time period informs the changes that have occurred within the genre. Although photographers and filmmakers alike are sometimes criticized for framing their subjects out of context, the audience must take into consideration the circumstances during which an image or a film is produced. Professionals in the field often find themselves in controversial and dangerous situations to even consider a particular technique. Nevertheless it is their duty to preserve and present the circumstances as they are, in hope to engage the audiences in a meaning-making process, to help them understand their social reality, and to enrich their collective memory.

Yet another shift, influenced by context, occurred during the mid-nineteenth century. Documentary films began to focus on war, politics, and public relations campaigns. Controversial German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi party account titled *Triumph of the Will* and Hollywood film director Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series best illustrate the nature of films being produced much later than Riis's time. It was not until the 1960s and 70s when social commentary and criticisms began to change the nature of documentary filmmaking. One of the more notable addresses of a social issue in film was Frederick Wiseman's 1967 *Titicut Follies*. The lawyer turned filmmaker produced the film about the harsh life of criminally insane inmates at Bridgewater Correctional Institution in Massachusetts with the eye of an investigator and critic of both the society and the government. Some of the other titles behind his name, such as *High School*, *Hospital*, *Welfare*, to name a few, are of a similar nature and with a similar purpose (Chronology of Documentary History, p. 14). Wiseman's work indeed very closely

resembles that of investigative journalists like Nellie Bly, Upton Sinclair, and Jacob Riis himself — the revealing of social issues concerning ordinary citizens, or “the other half.”

As the technology and the political climate changed so did the approach to documentary movie making. During the latter half of the twentieth century — the documentary became more personalized and intimate. *In Public Intimacy: The Development of First-person Documentary* communication scholar Patricia Aufderheide (1997) discusses the formation of this unique new genre intertwining the personal essay with a general reportage, and a well-told tale (p. 16).

It is marked not only by the first person voice in testimonial, but also by bringing the viewer into the world of the storytellers’ experience. Often socially engaged, it is rarely polemical. Indeed, it typically does not make a direct argument, but an implicit request for the viewer to recognize the reality of the speaker, and to incorporate that reality into his or her view of the world (Aufderheide, 1997).

Riis’s work closely resembles this approach and social documentary films in general as they rely on powerful imagery and depict the reality with the help of both, a subjective, documentarian-like use of facts and statistics and an objective narrator’s voice. His use of the magic lantern and rhetoric can essentially be viewed as one of the earliest prototypes of documentary film — a visual media genre that emerged years later.

Riis’s self-reflexive image captions and narration resemble the “voice” of his work. The term “voice” is also relevant for documentary films and was coined by film scholar Bill Nichols in his article *The Voice of Documentary* (1983). Here, Nichols (1983) suggests that the “voice” is something narrower than a style. He states that the personal consciousness of the speaker conveys the social point of view of the

documentary and it includes the familiar elements of narration and organization of materials. Nichols (1983) also suggests the rhetorical “voice” can seduce audiences by embodying qualities of insight, skepticism, judgment and independence —features distinct to the self-reflexive documentary style and in turn Riis’s work (p. 26).

Riis, just like a documentary filmmaker, had relied on a low budget and a little, if any return of his initial investment. He had ended up taking a partner in his endeavor; a friend who had paid all expenses for several months after Riis’s lantern show at the Broadway Tabernacle in 1895 — a period associated with the early beginning of cinema and the beginning of the end of the magic lantern show. The next few lectures yielded nothing for the reformer either, as documented in their expense accounts, yet the lectures had proven profitable in other, more valuable to him ways (Alland Sr., 1974).

Riis’s public showings indeed proved to be a turning point in his life. His efforts were indeed successful as the New York State Tenement House Act, first written in 1867, was finally enforced in 1901 largely because of Riis’s exposure of the filthy and disease-breath slums. The act was the first such law to ban the construction of dark, poorly ventilated tenement buildings in the state of New York. Among other sanctions, it required that new buildings must be built with outward-facing windows in every room, an open courtyard, proper ventilation systems, indoor toilets, and fire safeguards (The Tenement House Laws of the City of New York, 1903). From that point on, he was in constant demand. Riis made his first extensive speaking tour of the Midwest in 1893, took his first trip to the West Coast in 1900. He gave illustrated lectures every year until 1913, the year before his death (Goldberg, 1991).

As a crafty documentarian, he had fulfilled his duty to society and to the genre by meeting the main goal of documentary– the invocation of feelings, emotions, reactions, and sometimes even actions by the audience. It is indeed the kind of journalistic tool that is intended to investigate, report, and enlighten society. Technique, style, and rhetoric represent the voice of documentary (Nichols, 1991). “The voice of a documentary gives expression to a representation of the world, to perspective and commentary on the world,” Nichols writes. “The argument expressed through style and rhetoric, perspective and commentary, in turn, occupies a position within the arena of ideology” (p. 140).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Putting the peculiarities of the visual social documentary genre into appropriate context requires a closer look into the historical development of visual media and documentary film. In order to establish the connection between Jacob Riis's work and the visual social documentary genre this thesis took into consideration some of the key elements that are present in a documentary movie such as presence of real people vs. actors, location shooting vs. production stage, informative language vs. fictional script, and more. It also illuminated the ethnographic value of the Riis's account, his self-reflexive strategies highlighted in both his printed and spoken word that accompanied his photographic images. By looking at his work as a social documentary form of investigative journalism and a precursor to documentary film, the thesis demonstrated the emergence and development of such visual journalistic conventions.

As this thesis surveyed urbanization during the nineteenth century, it further illuminated the idea that the very nature of technological progress has ironically both fueled injustices in society and has aided crusaders like Riis to confront them. The study of technological progress and professional developments in the field of journalism and mass communication, particularly focusing on Jacob Riis's revolutionary visual rhetoric and investigative journalism style, suggest that societal needs for reform have the power to influence the creation of more prominent and impactful journalistic approaches in order to achieve massive effects.

The historiographical analysis of changes in the journalistic profession and the integration of visuals as an approach to documenting society and reporting about it are at the root of developmental and progressive scholars' work. Interpreting Riis's work in context with the media and the social conditions of the era through the means of reviewing primary sources play a unique role in understanding nineteenth-century photojournalism and the development of the visual social documentary.

Although a benchmark in these fields, Riis's work is still a rather small part of the world's documentary photography archives. Future researchers should consider exploring other social documentary photographers and filmmakers alike. The opportunity to compare their work and trace their efforts in enlightening society about needs for change, both locally and globally, would further highlight the power of the visual "story." The study of these efforts can strengthen the idea that the use of ideology, technology, and social awareness are inseparable parts in any quest for social reform.

Although Riis's illustrated lectures had served successfully as the basis for multiple articles and published books, his first photo reproductions in one of his most famous pieces *How the Other Half Lives* had never matched the impact of the big screen back in the magic lantern slideshow days. By projecting his already powerful photographs on a big screen, he had doubled the depth and realism of the situation. His use of a dissolve mechanism had made each photograph "move" into the next, just like a scene or a montage in motion pictures; "This was a peak moment for photography, when it still had revelations to impact. Seldom would it achieve such raw power over an audience again (Goldberg, 1991, p. 169).

On a different note, in *Bringing Solidarity with Subjects and Audiences in Sociology and Documentary Photography*, sociologist Tamara Kay (2011) claims that the direct effect of images on audiences is almost impossible to measure, but the evidence that they promote and support political and social movements is there (p. 424). “A single image may be only a moment, a person, a location,” she writes. “A book or an exhibit, however, is a story, a fuller depiction, an issue in all its scope” (Kay, 2011). In the same sense, this thesis was at a disadvantage because technological limitations during the Gilded Age confined the qualitative audience reception analysis only to newspaper reviews and commentary. There are no known records of Riis’s public lectures documenting the audience and his interactions with it, an approach much easier to utilize in present day and time.

A quantitative measurement of direct effect, among others, can serve as a valuable method to future research. Furthermore, the technological progress during the past two centuries has changed the way audiences produce (amateurs vs. professionals) and consume (online) images. The latter begs a question about the credibility of a given photographer and in turn, about the truthfulness of his or her work, and exploring direct effect on audiences could further inform about the influence of images.

In today’s visually saturated world, it may be difficult to prove that social documentary photography and/or film are effective tools for social reform. A longitudinal survey of human perception of documentary photographs and films, taking in consideration the technologies used to produce the same may be another valuable approach to study the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the messages conveyed through those visual mediums.

In his book, *Photography Changes Everything*, long-term Smithsonian photography curator and writer Marvin Heiferman (2012) also suggests that another issue in today's society is the fact that people focus on what makes photographs good instead of how they do their work (p. 15). Heiferman (2012) goes on to quote from John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies Histories* to convey an important point relevant to social documentary photography, film, and today's visual media as a whole.

Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations, which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents, which define it and set it to work. ... Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such (p. 15).

Nevertheless, Riis successfully influenced the institution of journalism as a writer and a photographer by reporting the truth about social conditions, and as an early cinematographer who put precisely the technological inventions of his time to work. His innovative flash photography technique is still recognized as revolutionary today. Steven Johnson denotes the same in his 2014 volume *How We Got to Now: Six Innovations That Made the Modern World*. Johnson (2014) suggests that Riis's vision should function as a corrective to the excesses of today's crude techno-determinism. "No one would have predicted that [flash photography's] very first mainstream use would come in the form of a crusade against urban poverty," he writes. "That twist belongs to Riis alone" (Johnson, 2014).

Gronbeck (2008) further supported the argument about images in general by suggesting that the insatiable hunger for the latter has characterized the public of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as eye centered. “The popularity and power of static and moving images in political and social life, their work in ethical-moral judgment of humanity’s moments of inhumanity, and their place in what we know and share with each other make what we see central to the contemporary world,” he wrote (Gronbeck, 2008).

Riis successfully paired his work with a practical ideology in order to produce an effective documentary visual spectacle. The available scholarship is the very bridge between his work relative to the journalism profession, technological growth, and the emergence of documentary moving pictures. This thesis further built that connection and invoked the idea that Riis’s work is revolutionary in more than one way, both in the field of journalism and visual mass media as a whole.

Although not noted as a forefather of the social documentary genre in visual media, Riis is nonetheless very much remembered by journalists in terms of his visual crusade for justice and advocacy for social change too. In 1994, *The New York Times* published an article titled *Echoes of Jacob Riis*. The piece opened with a quote from *How the Other Half Lives* suggesting that though written more than one hundred years ago the quote might have appeared in a last Sunday’s *Times* article talking about the many New Yorkers, most of whom illegal immigrants, living in basement cubicles today.

No one knows precisely how many people — the estimates range from 10,000 to 50,000 — are living in cellar cubicles, some of which rent for as much as \$125 a week. As with Riis’s immigrants, ‘it is their instinct to shun the light.’ Better the

squalid basement than being shipped back to their home countries by any of the government agencies they fear may have an eye out for them.

Nine years later, *The New Yorker* journalist Ian Frazier reminisced about the work of Jacob Riis and noted that New York has always been a place where reformers have scouted poor neighborhoods and have collected materials for books, photographs, and articles. “For baseball games, Yankee Stadium seats 50,287,” Frazier writes. If all the homeless people who now live in New York City used the stadium for a gathering, several thousand of them would have to stand” (p. 39).

As seen in Riis’s, Holdt’s, and Elliott’s work, visual social documentaries have been part of society for centuries now. Though social issues will continue to exist, if anything, the images of people and their suffering will continue to provoke thoughts about them and, in turn, social documentary in visual media will continue to engage individuals in activism and reform efforts for as long as society exists.

Alland, Sr. (1974), thoughtfully suggested that the lasting value of Riis’s images indeed lays not in the technique, but in the point of view of the photographer and the story, he has been so successful at telling despite of the lack of technology; “Riis’s photographs are like children’s drawings — spontaneous, uninhibited, honest. Like things in nature, the people who are his subjects fall into place by themselves and create a visual harmony that at once makes us aware of their reality and of the truth they project” (p. 13). For this, among many other reasons noted in this thesis, Riis’s work should be viewed as one of the chief precursors to the social documentary genre in visual media.

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EDUCATION

2011-14	University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Master of Arts Journalism and Media Studies	Las Vegas, NV
2005-09	University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Bachelor of Arts Journalism and Media Studies, Magna Cum Laude Minor in Film Studies	Las Vegas, NV

OTHER EDUCATION AND WORK EXPERIENCE

2013-14 UNLV School of Journalism and Media Studies UNLV
Teaching Assistant

- Leading of weekly in-class lectures and discussions for JOUR 101: Critical Analysis of Mass Media
- Management of WebCampus component of the course, including assignment and exam administration and grading
- Corresponding with and advising students throughout the semester
- Guest lecturing in History of Journalism and Special Topics: American Gonzo journalism classes

AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- 2014, Second place winner at the annual UNLV Greenspun College of Urban Affairs Graduate Research Symposium
- 2013, Awarded a Student Award of Excellence for a research article presented at the Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression held at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
- 2012, Awarded a Rebel Achievement Award for Excellence in Customer Service for the UNLV Division of Student Affairs
- 2010-11, Nominated with Rebel Achievement Award for outstanding customer service and administrative support for the UNLV Division of Student Affairs
- 2009, Recognized for 3+ years of service for the UNLV Division of Student Affairs with a Rebel Achievement Hall of Fame award
- 2008-09, Awarded the Ruthe Deskin journalism scholarship
- 2008-09, Awarded a CSUN Student Government Leadership scholarship for leadership and involvement with the UNLV campus and student life
- 2007-09, Awarded Greenspun College of Urban Affairs scholarship
- 2007-08, Awarded the Hank Kovell journalism scholarship
- 2006-07, Awarded the Barbara Greenspun journalism scholarship
- 2005-09, Named to the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs Dean's Honors List for outstanding academic work