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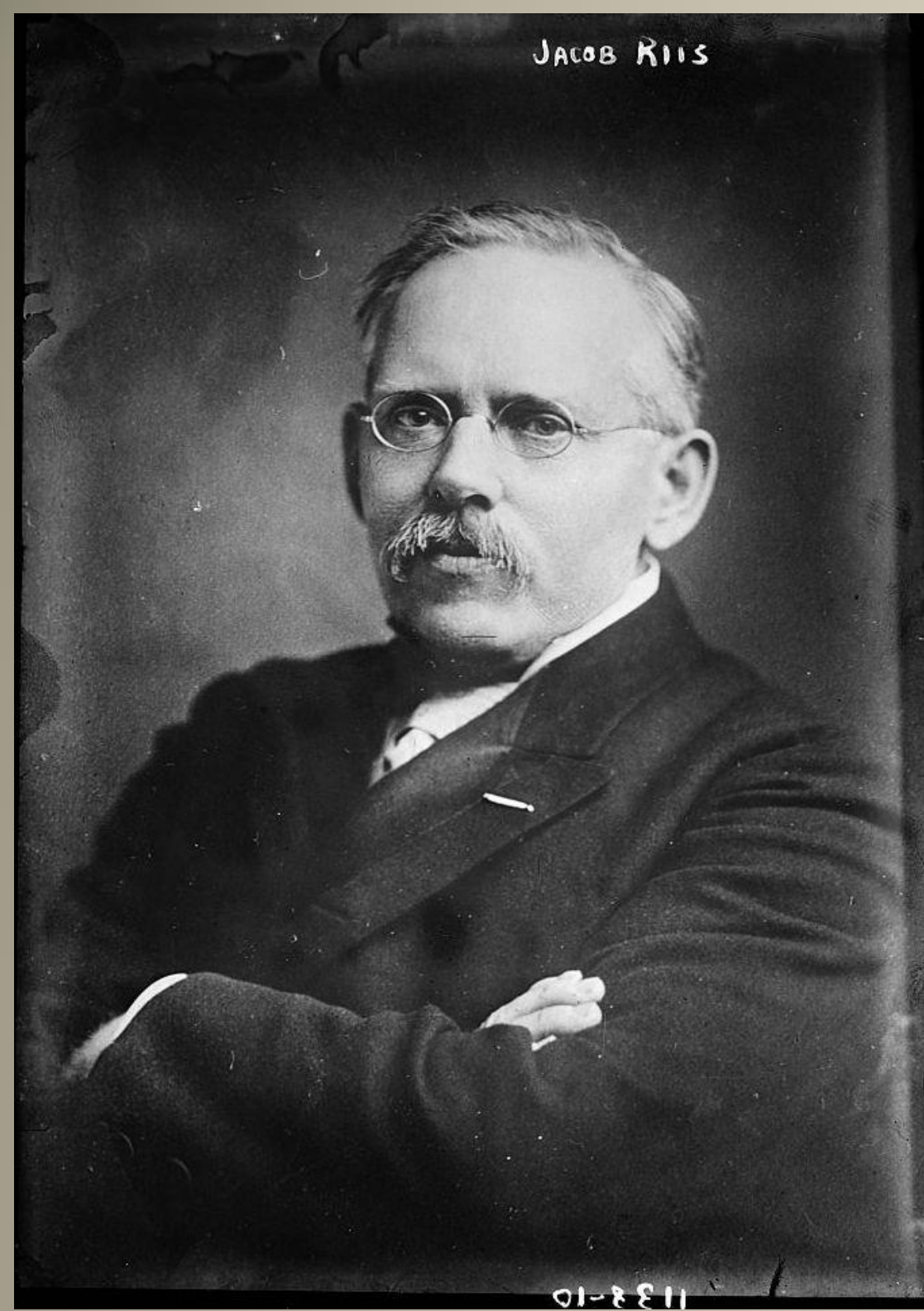
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Gilded Age Visual Media as the Impetus for Social Change: Jacob Riis's Reform Photography and the Antecedents of Documentary Film

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Abstract

This study examines the birth and evolution of the social documentary genre in visual media. It suggests that a mixture of ideology, technology, and social awareness are necessary for a successful social reform. It finds 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 film, this study demonstrates a connection between documentary film and Riis's social documentary photography and public slide exhibitions. The study concludes that in order to understand the present, one must study the past, and in these terms, Riis's work could be viewed as a precursor of the social documentary genre in visual media. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate the importance of visual documentaries, the idea that it anchors historical and collective memory, and that its history is still relevant to the twenty-first century.

Significance of the Study

Implementing developmental and progressive historiography, this study of Riis's work finds a revolutionary role for him in the fields of journalism and social documentary. It illuminates his efforts and demonstrates his value as an ethnographer, journalist, and documentary film producer.

The study discusses the significance of creating credible social images and the effectiveness of framing personal observations to create social awareness. It addresses the impact of Riis's efforts from the perspective of a rhetorician and an ethnographer, discussing the journalistic value of his work.

Method

- Developmental and progressive historiographical approaches defined.
- Visual media during the Gilded Age: A review of media from 1830-1930 as viewed by Developmental and Progressive schools.
- The Gilded Age society as presented by Riis: A study of newspaper publications in which Riis discusses the individual, city life, society, and the need for reform.
- The ethnographer in Riis: A closer look at Jacob Riis's books *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Making of an American* and their social documentary value.
- Riis's audience: Analysis of primary sources such as advertisement, reviews, and comments about Jacob Riis's magic lantern slide show presentations.
- The Gilded Age technology: A review of primary sources featuring discussions about photography, technology, and film, and their impact in society as a whole.
- Riis's journalistic contributions in context: Visual discourse analysis of 10 of Riis's photographs presented during his lectures.
- Riis and documentary film: Four documentary modes of representation in films defined and compared to Riis's approach as an early social documentarian.



Riis, J. *In the Home of an Italian Ragpicker Jersey Street*. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Riis, J. *Street Arabs - night, Boys in sleeping quarter*. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Riis, J. *The Mulberry Bend*. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].



Riis, J. *Police Station Lodger*. ca. 1895. Museum of the City of New York [online].



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



Riis, J. *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters*. ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York [online].

Implications

In the late 1800s, Riis photographed the poor and disadvantaged living on the streets of New York's destitute Five Points Area, a central location for newly arrived immigrants who faced enormous social and economic challenges. Riis began lecturing in front of groups and congregations, allowing him to compile materials into a book exposing the devastating living conditions in the tenements.

He effectively used the magic lantern, a popular at the time device, for all of his public showings. The careful sequencing of photographic images accompanied by powerful rhetoric told the story and helped the audience understand the issues at hand just like "moving pictures," or film, would in later decades.

Riis, just like a documentary filmmaker, had relied on a low budget and a little if any return on his initial investment. His magic lantern shows were advertised and reviewed in daily newspapers and flyers, quite similar to the way film was promoted and reviewed.

His work very closely resembles some of the main qualities of documentary films in another aspect — they rely on powerful imagery and depict the reality with the help of both an objective use of facts and statistics and a subjective narrator's voice.

Riis's photographs advanced the idea that images could be used as political statements, demonstrating both a social problem and a solution. His reform efforts were successful as the New York State Tenement House Act, first written in 1867, was finally enforced in 1901. Riis gave illustrated lectures every year until 1913, a year before his death.

Conclusion

Surveying the reformer's work in its historical context helps demonstrate an important aspect of the documentary image as a whole — its artifact-like quality, its ability to show unrehearsed moments in time while serving as a truthful representation of the subjects within its frame.

Since its inception in the 1800s, whether amateur or professional, documentary photography had proven to be timeless and influential on many levels and 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.