



DOCUMENTARY VS. ARTISTIC BIRTH PHOTOGRAPHY: TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING

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Abstract. *The growing demand for both artistic and documentary birth photography, particularly in home birth settings, highlights the need to explore the specifics of this genre from both technical and conceptual perspectives. The visualization of this unique moment is becoming increasingly significant, necessitating a deeper understanding of its nuances. This article aims to identify the key differences between documentary and artistic birth photography and to analyze the technological and compositional aspects essential for creating high-quality photographic material. The study reveals that birth photography can be categorized into three main approaches, with artistic photography rarely taking place during the actual birth. This is due to the need for studio lighting and controlled conditions, which contradict the dynamic and unpredictable nature of labor. Documentary photography, in contrast, focuses on capturing the authenticity of the moment but requires photographers to address numerous technical challenges. These include shooting in either excessively bright or low-light conditions without the use of flash. As a result, photographers must work with cameras featuring a high dynamic range, a silent shutter, and the ability to quickly adapt to changing environments. Particular attention is given to details in documentary birth photography, such as the first touches, parents' emotions, medical professionals' work, and moments of anticipation. Photographer-family interaction is also crucial; the photographer must be prepared to shoot at any time, establish a trusting relationship with the parents in advance, and work discreetly without interfering with the natural course of events. Beyond technical aspects, the study underscores the importance of ethical considerations in birth photography. The photographer should not disrupt or alter the flow of events and, if necessary, should even temporarily cease shooting when the situation demands it. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the conceptual foundations of documentary birth photography and its significance in preserving the unique moments of childbirth.*

Keywords: *documentary photography, artistic photography, childbirth, newborn photography, technology, storytelling.*

Introduction

Newborn photography has undergone a long evolution, influenced by technological advancements and shifting parental perceptions of preserving significant life moments. One of its emerging branches, documentary birth photography, is becoming increasingly popular and is now considered a key genre in family photography projects. Alongside this trend, styles and approaches to birth photography are also evolving, as this genre demands not only technical expertise but also a deep understanding of the moment's significance. Birth photography requires a balance between a photographer's professionalism and emotional sensitivity, enabling the creation of an honest and profound visual narrative.



Documentary birth photography possesses unique characteristics. Effective storytelling in this genre typically begins during the preparation stage and extends beyond the moment of birth, capturing the parents' emotions in the hours that follow. Artistic birth photography, on the other hand, largely relies on controlled conditions—most commonly taking place in a home setting or a specially prepared studio. The growing popularity of home births has opened new possibilities for creating artistic compositions in a natural environment.

While documentary and artistic photography may overlap in visual representation, they differ significantly in concept, style, and execution. Documentary photography strives to capture reality without interfering in the events, whereas artistic photography creates aesthetically refined and carefully composed images. These distinctions in the formation of documentary and artistic birth photography serve as the primary focus of this study.

Literature Review

The academic exploration of documentary and artistic newborn photography remains underdeveloped in scientific literature. Consequently, this study relies heavily on interviews, blogs, and recommendations from experienced professional photographers. Their insights allow for the systematization of key technical and creative aspects necessary for producing high-quality images in both documentary and artistic birth photography.

Notable contributions to this topic include works by R. Ribak and A. Leshnick [9], who analyze the commercial aspects of professional birth photography, and D. Hasanah and Y. Purwanti [4], who examine its role in medical institutions. Practical insights are provided by V. Brown [1], who emphasizes an honest approach to motherhood, and D. Hagues [3], who showcases the specifics of photographing home births. The artistic dimension of birth photography is explored by D. T. Photography [2], H. Hill [5], and M.-P. Photography [7], who highlight the aesthetic and emotional depth of images. The documentary approach is explained by JennaChristinaPhoto [6] and Mother Mother Doula [8], who view photography as a means of narrating the unique birth experience.



Despite the abundance of sources on this topic, there is a lack of systematic analysis regarding storytelling techniques in birth photography. Therefore, various scientific methods were employed to analyze, categorize, and structure information within the framework of this research.

Purpose of the article

This article aims to identify the key differences between documentary and artistic birth photography and to determine the technical aspects that contribute to effective birth photography. To achieve this goal, several tasks were undertaken during the study. The first stage involved defining the essence of newborn photography and analyzing the main stages of the shooting process. Next, different types of birth photography were examined, with a particular focus on the documentary genre and its specifics. The final stage of the research identified the fundamental differences between artistic and documentary photography. Special attention was given to the role of the photographer in this process, as their professional skills, technical expertise, and ethical approach directly impact the final result.

Research results

In the past, capturing the moment of birth through photography was impossible due to the lack of appropriate technology. However, this does not mean that people did not value visual representations of childbirth. Archaeological findings from various cultures include sculptures and engravings depicting the birthing process, demonstrating a deep awareness of its significance. Modern technology has greatly expanded the ability to preserve such moments, thanks to the widespread availability of photographic equipment, including smartphones. As a result, most women who have given birth in recent years possess at least a few photographs from this period, ranging from the first moments of motherhood to more detailed documentation of the entire birth process, including active labor, delivery, and the early postpartum period [8].

The photographic documentation of childbirth is divided into three stages: the prenatal period, birth, and the postpartum period.

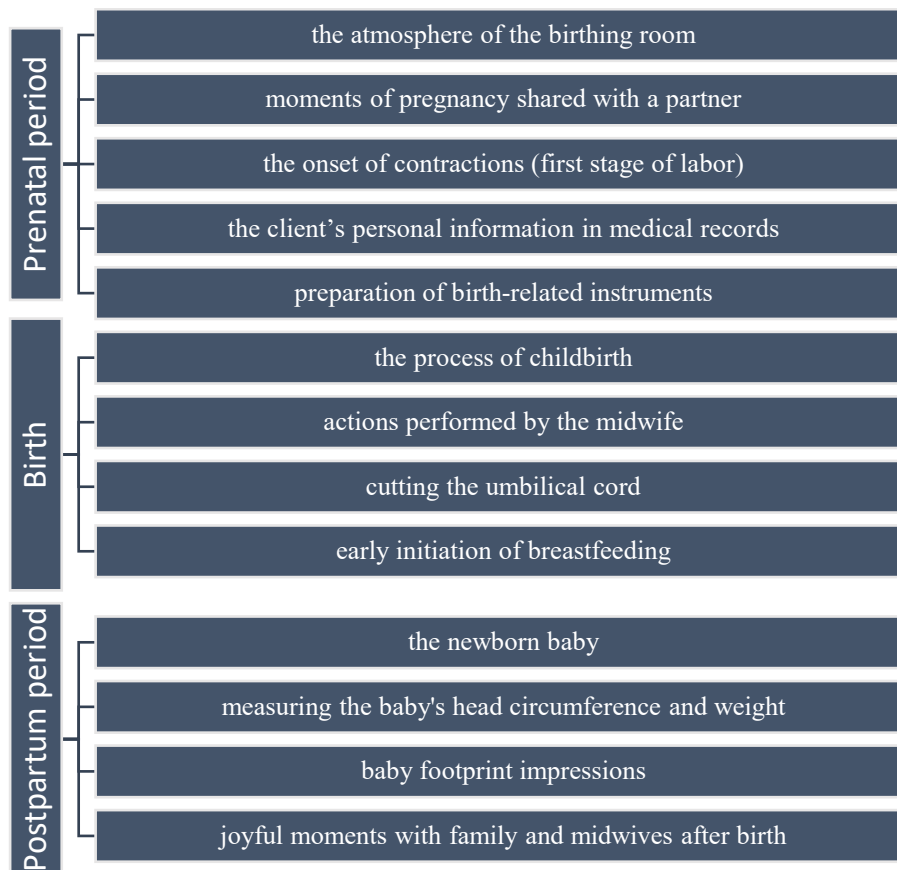


Fig. 1. Photographic moments in the childbirth process [4]

Today, documentary and artistic birth photography are available on the market in several formats. The first is amateur photography, taken not by professionals but by parents or relatives. These images are shared to celebrate the joy of childbirth, often carrying emotional and personal value rather than aiming for professional quality. The second format is documentary photography, a professional approach designed to capture the birth process as accurately and authentically as possible, without embellishment, preserving the real atmosphere of the event. The third type is artistic photography, which differs from documentary photography by emphasizing visual aesthetics, composition, and the interplay of light and shadow. This type of photography transforms the event into a work of art. Below, we examine these types in more detail.

Amateur photography. The defining feature of amateur birth photography is its reliance on smartphones, which means image quality is limited by the built-in camera's technical capabilities. These images are often edited using integrated filters available



on various devices, resulting in a certain uniformity across photographs. However, with advancements in digital image processing in smartphones, the overall quality of these images has improved significantly and can sometimes approach professional standards under favorable shooting conditions. In most cases, the responsibility for documenting the birth falls on a partner or medical staff. However, it is important to recognize that a father or partner's primary role is to be an active participant in the process, rather than handling additional tasks. This allows them to focus on supporting the mother, which is crucial for her emotional and physical well-being [8].

Although smartphone cameras are widely accessible, professional cameras remain in demand, and photographers continue to thrive due to their expertise. The development of specialized fields such as birth photography provides insight into how professionals distinguish themselves from amateurs, adapt to an unstable job market, and contribute uniquely to visual culture [9].

A professional birth photographer operates in the background, remaining unobtrusive while attentively capturing key moments. Specialized equipment, such as backup cameras, extra batteries, and memory cards, ensures that no technical failures occur at critical moments. Additionally, a professional photographer can produce a cohesive series of images or individual shots suitable for family archives or social media [8].

Professional photography. Unlike amateur snapshots, professional birth photography is not just about pressing a button—it is a complex creative process. It requires careful attention to composition, the selection of optimal angles, and the ability to convey the emotional depth of the moment [8].

Studio newborn photography and documentary birth sessions represent two fundamentally different approaches. Studio sessions are typically conducted within the first two weeks of a baby's life, as newborns remain naturally sleepy during this period, making it easier to position them in various poses. Parents who choose studio photography receive carefully planned, stylish images. The photographer prepares an appropriate backdrop, selects decorations, adjusts the lighting, and composes the scene according to the intended concept.



Documentary photography, in contrast, has no such time constraints and can capture any moment from the birth itself onward. Contemporary newborn photographers often offer services to document the birth process itself. Since the photographer does not interfere with events, the session can take place at any time – from the baby's first moments to several months later. The choice depends on the story parents wish to tell and their comfort level. Documentary photography is particularly valuable for families seeking natural, candid images that capture a child's activity and emotions. Recreating such authenticity in a studio setting is nearly impossible [7].

Vanessa Brown, a photographer specializing in documentary newborn photography, describes the art of this genre as allowing individuals to witness their own lives—motherhood, joy, challenges, and daily routines that seem unforgettable yet often fade with time. This is the essence of documentary photography: preserving authentic moments as they naturally unfold. These images capture everyday details – simple rituals and the rhythms of life. Unlike studio photography, documentary sessions rarely involve staging. Even when capturing a mother waking beside her child, the photographer prepares for the moment by considering lighting, composition, and other technical aspects, yet does not interfere with the natural course of events [1].

In an interview, documentary photographer Jenna Christina states that documentary photography is not merely a style but rather an approach that defines how a photographer interacts with a family and their newborn. She emphasizes that this approach extends beyond photography itself and shapes the relationship between the photographer and the family. Documentary photography is, in essence, a mindset that goes beyond technical documentation. Christina also highlights that documentary photography does not claim to be entirely objective. Every photographer has personal motivations for working in this genre, which influence what they choose to focus on during a session. Thus, the selection of subjects, moments, and focal points is always subjective, making each series of images unique and reflective of the photographer's artistic vision [6].

When capturing birth moments, the photographer seeks to convey something beyond the obvious. Each image tells a story and carries emotions that go deeper than



what is immediately visible. Birth photography is not just about recording an event—it is about creating a heartfelt narrative that resonates emotionally. Even without staging, a photograph becomes a work of art by capturing genuine emotions that cannot be artificially recreated. It invites families to relive the unique moment captured by the photographer, allowing them to immerse themselves once more in the emotions of that experience and preserve them forever [2].

The key differences between documentary and studio newborn photography are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Fundamental differences between documentary and artistic studio newborn photography

Criterion	Documentary photography	Artistic studio photography
Timing	Any time—from the first hours after birth to several months old.	First two weeks of life, while the newborn is still sleepy and easily posed.
Location	At home or in another natural family environment.	In a specially equipped photography studio.
Style	Natural, candid, without photographer intervention.	Posed, artistically composed shots.
Newborn's poses	Natural movements and positions of the baby.	Specially arranged poses, often with the use of props.
Parents' role	Interact with the baby in a familiar environment.	Primarily assist the photographer or pose with the baby.
Emotional focus	Capturing genuine moments, family connections, and daily routines.	Emphasizing aesthetics, creating an ideal artistic image.
Props	Minimal or none—everything remains as natural as possible.	Extensive use of props such as baskets, blankets, flowers, hats, etc.
Photo editing	Minimal color and light correction to preserve authenticity.	Extensive editing, skin retouching, and artistic enhancements.
Main objective	Preserving real-life memories from this period.	Creating an idealized, artistic representation of the newborn.

Note: Systematized by the author based on research [7]

The process of newborn photography, whether in a studio or documentary format, has its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from other types of photography. Unlike wedding or other family photography, which has long been a traditional part of ceremonies, childbirth does not have established visual customs and is typically not accompanied by professional photography. Initially, cameras entered delivery rooms in the form of family members' smartphones, used for instant image sharing. However,



as photography became more integrated into everyday life, professional photographers began documenting this significant moment as well [9].

By analyzing interviews and blogs from renowned photographers worldwide, it is possible to identify the distinctive features of newborn photography that define this genre.

Table 2 – Technical, technological, and stylistic features of newborn photography

Criterion	Features
Technical aspects	
Lighting	Birth photography often takes place in low-light conditions, requiring fast lenses and cameras with high ISO capabilities. Flash is not used to avoid disrupting the process.
Equipment	Professional cameras with a wide dynamic range (e.g., full-frame cameras) and fast prime lenses (35mm, 50mm, 85mm) for shooting in challenging conditions.
Editing	Minimal post-processing to maintain the authenticity of the moment: adjustments to light, shadows, contrast, and white balance.
Angles and composition	Various shooting perspectives are used: close-ups for details (hands, embraces, first glances), mid-range shots for overall context, and wide shots to capture the atmosphere.
Focus and depth of field	Shallow depth of field is used to highlight emotions and key details while blurring the background to create an intimate feel.
Stylistic features	
Documentary style	Emphasis on authenticity, with no staged shots. The photographer remains unobtrusive and does not interfere with events.
Emotional depth	Genuine emotions are captured—pain, joy, relief, first tears, and embraces.
Attention to detail	Birth photography goes beyond just the moment of birth, capturing the mother's hands, the father's touch, glances, facial expressions, and family reactions.
Storytelling	Each photo series should tell a complete story—from the start of labor to the baby's first moments on the mother's chest.
Color and editing	Black-and-white photos are often used to enhance emotional depth, while warm, natural tones highlight the softness of the moment.
Authenticity and imperfections	Preserving the reality of birth is essential: the mother's exhaustion, the natural process, and the unpredictability of events are all part of the unique story.
Ethical considerations	The photographer respects the family's preferences regarding framing intimate moments, privacy levels, and permission for photo publication.

Note: Systematized based on the article [5]

Photographer Diana Hagues emphasizes that the most powerful images capturing the emotions of childbirth are those where a mother holds her baby for the first time. Her gaze reflects a mix of love, relief, and awe. Equally touching are the expressions of fathers or grandmothers as they lovingly watch their partner or daughter. These



moments become the most valuable in a photographer's work, as they capture genuine, unfiltered emotions that will remain in the family's memory forever [3].

Photographers specializing in capturing significant life events operate as independent professionals, as their income depends on selling their services. Having always worked in a competitive environment, they have not experienced the instability of self-employment as severely as other creative professions.

When choosing a photographer for documentary birth photography, parents are exceptionally selective. The photographer must be someone they feel comfortable with, as they will be present during some of the most intense and intimate moments of their lives and their child's birth. This selection process involves prior meetings, conversations, and interviews. Parents must be confident that the photographer is not only highly skilled but also capable of fostering an atmosphere of trust and respect for their emotions. This process is delicate and time-consuming, as the quality and emotional value of the photographs depend on the understanding between the parents and the photographer.

As Tew Sarah notes, the primary responsibility of the photographer is to remain as inconspicuous as possible, work without flash, be quiet, and never interfere in the events. They should not ask subjects to change position or look at the camera, as the main goal is to capture the real atmosphere. High-quality optics allow shooting even in low-light conditions. At the same time, if medical staff request that the photographer stop shooting due to complications during labor, they must immediately comply and, if necessary, assist in the situation. Above all, the birth process must be respected, and its natural course should not be disrupted [10].

Ethics play a crucial role in birth photography, particularly in interactions with others. Ethical considerations are an ongoing discussion within the photography industry. When shooting in specific locations, photographers must adhere to existing rules and ethical standards. In the context of birth photography, which often takes place in medical institutions, it is essential to follow each facility's regulations. A hospital is a public service space, so photography should not interfere with staff operations or violate the privacy of patients and their families [4].



Regarding the final product—photographs themselves—despite the dominance of digital photography, there remains a strong demand for printed images of this event. Additionally, there is a growing trend not only in documentary photography of newborns but also in creating documentary photo books on this subject [10].

Conclusions

Birth photography, whether documentary or artistic, is currently available in three main formats. The first consists of amateur images taken by parents or medical staff, most often using smartphones. These serve as personal keepsakes but do not aim for professional quality or artistic value. In contrast, professional birth photography is divided into two categories – documentary and artistic. Artistic photography is rarely conducted during labor itself, as it requires studio lighting and controlled conditions. Therefore, documentary photography remains the primary genre for capturing the birth experience, offering its own unique characteristics and technical challenges.

The defining aspects of documentary birth photography include working in unconventional lighting conditions – either overly bright or insufficiently lit – without the option of using flash, which could disrupt the process. As a result, photographers must use cameras with a high dynamic range, allowing them to work effectively in challenging environments. Composition and camera angles are also crucial, as delivery rooms are often crowded with medical staff, requiring the photographer to be unobtrusive while still capturing the atmosphere. Special attention is given to details – doctors' hands, a mother's first touch, moments of anticipation, and the actual birth. These images are typically categorized into three main stages: prenatal, birth, and postpartum, each with its own specific techniques and approaches.

Beyond the technical aspects, the relationship between the photographer and the parents is equally important. Trust is essential, as allowing an unfamiliar professional into such an intimate experience is unacceptable. Arrangements are made in advance, and the photographer must be prepared to shoot at any time, as labor is unpredictable. Ethical considerations are also paramount: birth photography should convey the depth and significance of the experience without violating personal boundaries or the parents' beliefs.



Regarding the final presentation of the images, birth photography can be delivered in digital format, as printed photographs, or as professionally designed photo books, creating a unique visual chronicle of a child's birth.

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