

Proposal for Critical Review

The Photography 3: Your Own Portfolio course calls for the student to carry out a critical review based on researching a particular photographer or photographic theme. I am proposing the follow as my theme for this work: ***'CONTEXT AND MEANING IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY – A Comparative Study'***.

In 'A Short History of Photography' Walter Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht's reservations about the photograph's capacity for conveying unambiguous meaning: (Benjamin et al, 2011, location 385 of 415).

"The situation is complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions."

Brecht's view is now generally accepted and the consensus is that photographic meaning is both mutable and context driven. Barthes' essay 'Rhetoric of the Image' is a particularly useful construct to analyse this question. (Barthes, 1964, pp37). Barthes proposes that a photograph creates meaning through both denotation and connotation. The former is the literal description of what is depicted – a picture of a cross denotes its referent, a cross. The same picture may also connote other meanings – in Christian countries for example the cross will stand for the church. Connoted meaning is created through cultural codes unique to particular societies – to a bushman in Africa for example a cross may mean something quite different from Christianity. Connotation is also influenced by how and where a photograph is displayed – a photograph shown on Facebook and viewed on a computer screen in the someone's living room may connote a different message from how it might be interpreted if it were seen as a large print in an art gallery.

Barthes also considers the use of text with images and suggests that it is used to direct the meaning connoted by the image, either by locking it down (anchorage) or by providing additional information suggesting other possible connotations (relay). He also considers how sequences of images work to create meaning and takes the view that the *'signifier of connotation is then no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that...of the concatenation'*.

Meaning does not therefore depend simply on the photographer's intent, which might be called the context of production, but also on how an image is presented, whether it is associated with other images and/or text, the cultural conditioning of the viewer and the environment within which it is viewed. In documentary photography all of these factors weigh heavily on how successful the artist/photographer is in communicating his/her message.

The idea of my Critical Review is to conduct detailed studies of three significant works of documentary photography and to present the outcome of these in a form of comparative study. My aim is to consider each with respect to the interplay between context and meaning. I hope to identify common threads, where they differ and the consequences of these differences. My aim is not to decide which approach is right and which is wrong. Rather it is to expand my knowledge of the genre, to identify alternative approaches and by so doing to inform my own photographic practice.

The works I have in mind are *The Americans* by Robert Frank, *Fish Story* by Alan Sekula and *Bleed* by Simon Norfolk.

Robert Frank's 'The Americans' was published in 1959. (Frank, 1959). Today it is regarded as a groundbreaking book because it signaled a move to a personal 'subjective' style of documentary. The work presents Frank's personal vision of America in some 80 photographs distilled from some 28,000 images he captured during his road trips over a two-year period. The book relies largely on the narrative created by the photographs. Text is limited to just short captions identifying where and when the photos were made and a freewheeling essay by Jack Kerouac at the start of book which positions the work as visual poetry. Since the very beginning the work has been seen as opaque and multiple, often contradictory, readings have been proposed by commentators. This form of documentary positions the photographer as auteur – a creative genius who presents his/her own subjective view - rather than as a simple reporter of facts. This was a significant factor leading to the representation of documentary photography as art and photographer as artist – something in which John Szarkowski at MOMA played a significant part. Many others were to follow Frank's lead.

In the late 1960s Allan Sekula and others proposed a more politicized form of documentary. He critiqued the traditional social documentary models and was opposed the classification of the single documentary image as aestheticized art. He supported this view through his own writing and art/photography. His work was largely based on the use of images in conjunction with text, and was shown as gallery installations (with text panels, prints and slideshows) and in book format. *Fish Story* is a monumental work, comprising of 105 large-scale, color photographs interspersed with text panels written by Sekula, as well as two slide projections. (Sekula, 1995). He undertook the work over several years. Ostensibly his subject is the maritime industry but the real subject is globalization. He tracks the economic decline of maritime industry in the North and West with its corresponding rise in the South and East.

Simon Norfolk is a leading contemporary documentary photographer. He is ostensibly a war photographer but a war photographer with a difference. Norfolk shuns the classical mode of reportage war photography. Instead he revisits in the aftermath sites of significance to the waging of modern warfare. Much of his work has been done in conflict zones, which he calls the battle space, but his overall project *Et in Arcadia Ego* has seen him photograph the technologies of war including for example supercomputers used for military purposes. Norfolk's work has a strong political agenda which he makes clear on his website, in his gallery shows and in his books. That said his images are very beautiful which some might argue diverts attention from the serious issues he is documenting. Norfolk believes by presenting his images in this way he is able

to attract an audience for his critique of war. I will use his work *Bleed* for my comparative study. (Norfolk, 2002).

These works span a time period of more than 50 years and each represents a different approach ranging from the subjective personal documentary of Frank to the politicized anti-aesthetic work of Sekula to the politicized yet aesthetic work of Norfolk. As such they offer the potential to assess alternative points of view in relation to the question of meaning and context in documentary photography from which I hope to learn.

References

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