OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

PHOTOGRAPHY 3: YOUR OWN PORTFOLIO

CRITICAL REVIEW

CONTEXT AND MEANING IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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In his essay ‘On the Invention of Photographic Meaning’ Allan Sekula compares two photographs, one by Alfred Stieglitz and the second by Lewis Hine and observes that ‘it is only by beginning to uncover the social and historical contexts of the [two] photographer[s] can we begin to acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention.’ (Sekula, 1975).

Sekula is making the point that the context of production of a photographic work is a key determinant of meaning. When examining this issue many factors need to be considered: the photographer’s background, beliefs, culture, race, gender and so on; the prevailing conventions and constraints on what constituted ‘excellent’ and ethical photography at the time of the work was made; and the influence brought to bear by institutional decision makers such as editors, publishers. The nature of the subject matter and the interaction between photographer and the subject are also important considerations.

The idea that meaning is largely derived from authorial intention has however been seriously challenged since the 1960s. In ‘Death of the Author’ Barthes states that ‘text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions’. (Barthes, 1977A). His argument applies equally to images. Foucault also questions the ideological nature of authorship in his essay ‘What is an Author?’ (Foucault, 1969).

Some, such as Irish literary theorist Sean Burke have presented critical arguments against Barthes and Foucault’s contentions (Burke, 2008). Nevertheless, it is clear today that demystifying the author has resulted in an acceptance of the role of the viewer. The author may not be dead but the understanding of the relationship between photographer/author and viewer/reader has significantly changed. It is now generally accepted that photographic meaning is mutable and is significantly (if not entirely) influenced by the cultural conditioning of the viewer and the circumstances in which a photographic work is viewed (the context of presentation).

Roland Barthes’ essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ presents a particularly useful construct for analysing the way in which viewers interpret images. (Barthes, 1964). Barthes proposes that a photograph creates meaning through both detonation 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 will however connote other meanings – in Christian countries for example the cross will stand for the church. Connotated meaning is created through cultural codes unique to particular societies and is also influenced by how and where a photograph is displayed. Barthes also discusses the use of text with images and suggests that it is used to direct the meaning connotated by the image, either by locking it down (anchorage) or by providing additional information opening up other possible meanings (relay). (Barthes, 1977B).

In this paper I explore how meaning is influenced by the contexts of production and presentation by analysing two documentary photography works – Robert Frank’s ‘The Americans’ and Simon Norfolk’s ‘Afghanistan’.

ROBERT FRANK – THE AMERICANS

Robert Frank was born in Zurich in 1924 into a Jewish family. He spent his formative years on the edge of Nazi Germany. He later recalled hearing Hitler on the radio, 'talking – threatening – cursing the Jews. It's forever on your mind…' (Greenough, 2009, pp6). He learned early in life what it is like to be a member of a threatened minority within society.

On leaving school, Frank trained as a photographer receiving a solid grounding in photographic technique. After the war he began to travel ending up in New York in March 1947. Frank became part of an art community that included painters such as Klein, de Koonig, Pollack and Rothko. He was greatly influenced by their commitment to risk taking and producing work that celebrated personal expression. He became increasingly contemptuous of traditional photojournalism and its 'stories with a beginning, middle and an end.' (Greenough, 2009, pp 30).

Whilst in New York, Frank worked briefly for Harpers Bazaar under Alexei Brodovitch. Brodovitch's expressive style, as epitomized in his book 'Ballet' with its blurry, out of focus, contre-jour images, clearly influenced Frank and many of these aesthetic elements are to be found in his later work (Brodovitch, 1945), see Figure One.

Figure One: *Ballet 1945* ©Alexei Brodovitch

In 1948 Frank gave up his magazine work to travel around Europe and South America. His reputation as a photographer grew and in 1955 he had seven photographs in Edward Steichen's landmark 'Family of Man' exhibition. Despite this, he shared Walker Evans' concerns about the overt sentimentality of the Steichen exhibition. He and Evans had become close friends and had worked together on a number of projects. Evans encouraged Frank to apply for a Guggenheim fellowship and helped him with his application.

Frank outlined his intentions in his proposal as follows: 'What I have in mind, then, is observation and record of what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilisation born here and spreading elsewhere'. (Greenough et al, 1994, pp109).

His two Guggenheim grants gave Frank the freedom to follow his own path. He was no longer subject to the editorial oversight of magazine editors that he hated. His explorations took the form of a series of road trips. Always he took the back road, avoiding iconic locations such as the National Parks and their association with 'views that reaffirm the utopian centrality of wilderness within North American identity'. (Wells, 2011, pp140).

Frank was genuinely shocked by what he found and his subjects became the racism, consumer culture, media power and urban alienation that he observed. The photograph, 'Charleston, South Carolina' is a good example of Frank's approach (see Figure Two). As I see it this picture seems to address the question of race relations head on. On a denotive level, it shows an African American woman holding a white baby in her arms. She is leaning against a wall. The woman's expression is one of calm dignity. The child, although clearly very young, has and intense, almost haughty look. On a connotive level, the black woman seems to stand for the situation of her race in American society at that time — subordinated to whites, largely relegated to lowly paid unskilled jobs and resigned to their situation. This was about to change with the upsurge in the civil rights movement in the sixties.

The tenor of the *Americans* also appears to have been greatly influenced by Frank's own arrest and incarceration in McGehee Arkansas in November 1955. He later recalled '…I didn't know anybody, they could have killed me…. if I had been black, you know…. I think that came through in the photographs – that violence I was confronted with….' (Greenough, 2009, pp 155).

Figure Two: *Charleston, South Carolina* ©Robert Frank

The images Frank made are highly expressive and personal. They are dark, edgy and opaque, quite unlike the simple and transparent images typically shown in the picture press. They are the view of an outsider with empathy for the oppressed.

Frank's intention had always been to present the work in book form. His original Guggenheim proposal had included support from Delpire in France who had agreed to publish the work. Subsequently his work has also been frequently exhibited in galleries. For the purposes of this review however I have focused on his published works. (In my review of Simon Norfolk's work below, I discuss the question of how showing documentary works in an art gallery impinges on meaning. The arguments I make there also apply to Frank's gallery exhibitions).

When Frank returned to New York after concluding his road trips, he edited down his thousands of images to around 80. He sequenced them and made a maquette of how he wanted the book to look. He placed each image on a right hand page opposite a page containing only a brief caption describing the location. This construction relies on the progression of images to create meaning rather side-by-side comparison. It is more demanding on the viewer requiring him or her to remember what they've seen on preceding pages. The format is similar to Walker Evans's *American Photographs* see Figure Three. (Evans, 1938).

Figure Three: Walker Evans *American Photographs* Layout ©Walker Evans

In practice, however, Frank was unable to find a US publisher who was prepared to take on his work and he fell back on the original commitment made by Delpire to publish in France. Delpire decided to publish *Les Americains* (Frank, 1958) as the fifth work in his series *Encyclopie Essentielle,* which were quasi-educational books*,* aimed at introducing French audiences to the history and culture of other countries. The form of presentation was not as Frank had wished see Figure 4. The images were placed opposite texts from many influential writers selected by Alain Bosquet. In this form the meaning of the photographs was anchored by the probing texts that presented a hostile European view of America.

The book received very little attention both in France and America. It did however help Frank to find an American publisher, Grove Press. Indeed, Grove agreed to publish the work in the sequence and format that Frank had originally planned. They also agreed to include an essay by Jack Kerouac as the introduction. The book was published in 1959 (Frank, 1959).

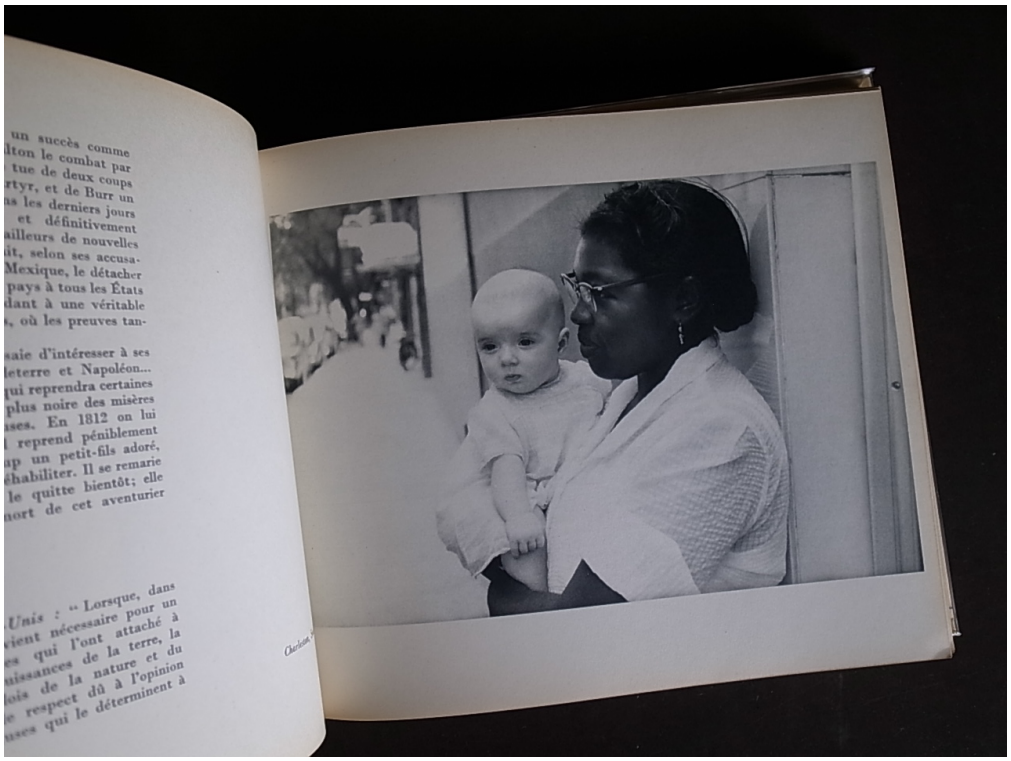

Figure Four: Robert Frank *Les Americains* ©Robert Frank

The revised sequencing, layout and introductory essay completely transformed the book. Kerouac's essay positioned the work as poetic stating that 'Anybody doesn't like these pitchers don't like potry, see?' (Frank, 1995, pp 9) and without the anchoring text it became more personally expressive and open as regards meaning.

The book shocked critics and in the climate of the Cold War it was read as overtly anti-American, with its sad, pessimistic images, which focused on the tawdry, the mundane and the alienation that pervaded society. This was a long way from America's self image at that time as the land of opportunity. Even Frank's long-term Swiss friend Gotthard Shuh wrote in a letter to Frank '…your new pictures… have left us shocked and haunted.' (Greenough, 2009, pp 145). By 1969, however, when a new edition was released by Aperture the book had become acclaimed as a pioneering example of a new style of personal, expressive documentary.

Since its publication there has been collective agreement that the tone of the work is harsh and sad but there has been little consensus on what the individual images mean. Frank has stated that his intention was to respond to the country not by 'looking at it but [by] feeling something from it,' (Greenough, 2009, pp123). Over time, many interpretations have been put forward:

- In a preview of the work in the 1958 US Camera Annual Walker Evans emphasised its irony and detachment (Maloney, 1958)
- John Szarkowski (in press release for his 1978 MOMA exhibition *Mirrors and Windows)* describes Frank's work as the prototypical example of photography as a window on the world, 'through which the exterior world is explored in all its presence and reality'. He offers no specific interpretation of Frank's work, however, describing it as '…a personal vision of the Eisenhower era.' (Szarkowski, 1978)

- John Brumfield moved beyond a critique of the photographic style and tone of the work to look at what the images might mean. (Brumfield, 1980). He proposed that the motifs which appear repeatedly in *The Americans*, e.g. the American Flag, motor cars, jukeboxes and so on, are a set of culturally defined connotations, see Figure Five. Others have refuted this on the grounds that it ignores the literal (denotative) meaning of the photographs and that it assumes that Frank, a Swiss, was familiar with American connotative conventions (see Cook, 1982).

Figure Five: Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey ©Robert Frank

Some 60-years on Frank's photographs in *The Americans* seem to resist attempts to pin them down to specific meaning. Perhaps this is as it should be, in line with Frank's original intention to produce a personal response to what he found.

SIMON NORFOLK – AFGHANISTAN CHRONOTOPIA

Simon Norfolk was born in Nigeria. He was educated in England studying Philosophy and Sociology at Bristol and Oxford Universities. He went on to study Documentary Photography at Newport University. After graduation he worked for a number of left wing political publications focusing on racism and fascist groups. From the beginning of his career, Norfolk has been a photographer with strong political convictions.

In 1994 Norfolk turned his back on traditional photojournalism, with its emphasis on capturing the immediate action of current news events, and started to develop his own style of politicized landscape photography. His primary interest became conflict and war and in particular 'the way that the spaces that we live in are primarily determined by warfare' (Norfolk, 2012).

Norfolk's contention is that the photojournalistic approach to war photography is outmoded as

military technology has moved on. In an interview with the National Media Museum in 2011 for example he commented 'War photography is using the same language and modes that was invented by Robert Capa…If military technology has moved on so rapidly in 60 years how come we are using a sixty year old mode of talking about war photography' (Norfolk, 2011). The view that much photojournalism is hackneyed and outmoded is a shared by other contemporary artist/photographers. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin summed up the nature of the entries for 2008 World Press Awards as follows 'Again and again similar images are repeated, with only the actors and settings changing. Grieving mothers, charred human remains, sun sets, women giving birth, children playing with toy guns [and so on]….' (Broomberg and Chanarin, 2008).

Norfolk sees each of his photographic series as 'chapters', part of an overarching project which he calls 'Et in Arcadia ego' and is his attempt to understand how 'war and the need to fight war has formed our world' (Norfolk, 2014A). His work first received significant public attention with the publication of his book *For Most of It I Have No Words: Genocide, Landscape, Memory* in 1998 (Norfolk, 1998). These photographs are black and white landscapes of places around the world that have witnessed genocide.

Between 2000 and 2002 his interest in war prompted Norfolk to make two trips to Afghanistan. He travelled independently operating outside the normal embedded photojournalist path. He took with him a 5x4 view camera. He acknowledges now that 'It was more as an experiment' (Norfolk, 2013). However, he quickly saw the potential that this medium has for recording the aftermath of events in great detail. He had studied the work of century artists such as Poussin and Lorrain and their depiction of ruins as metaphors for the fall of empire. He developed a style that references these painters, see Figures Six and Seven.

Figure Six: View of the Campo Vaccino, Rome, 1636 by Claude Lorrain

Figure Seven: King Amanullah's Victory Arch from *Afghanistan* ©Simon Norfolk

His Afghanistan photographs formed the basis of his book *Afghanistan: Chronotopia*, which was published in 2002. The term 'chronotopia' derives from Norfolk's interest in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a chronotope – 'a place that displays the 'layeredness' of time.' (Norfolk, 2014B). For example, in the photograph, 'King Amanullah's Victory Arch', sees Figure Seven above, the past is referenced directly in the form of the historic arch, which was built in 1919 to celebrate independence from the British. At the same time the arch and the surrounding landscape shows the scars of the recent conflict with the British, Americans and before them the Russians. The ruin can also be read metaphorically to suggest the inevitable fall (or failure) of empires, as in the paintings of Claude Lorrain, which the photograph references. In this case Norfolk appears to be referring to the abject failure of Western powers to subjugate Afghanistan through military force.

Norfolk's images are far removed from the typical war photographer's images of Afghanistan. David Campany has coined the term 'Late Photography' to describe work such as Norfolk's which records the aftermath of events or as he puts it 'the *trace of the trace* of an event'. (Campany, 2003).

Unlike Frank it is not clear what form of presentation Norfolk had in mind for presentation of his photographs at the time of their production. In practice he has used a variety of media including large gallery prints, a book and a comprehensive website.

His use of a large format camera (enabling the production of large prints), his art history references and his contemplative style of photography all seem to suggest that the work was destined for the gallery. Indeed as David Campany has noted, 'Late Photography' 'has become a central trope in [contemporary art's] dialogue with documentary' (Campany, 2003).

Showing documentary photography in the gallery risks the work being viewed as an aesthetic object rather than a document, thereby losing its power to draw attention to the underlying issues. Allan Sekula for example warned that when documentary is thought to be art 'the referential function collapses into the expressive function.' (Sekula, 1999, pp 122). The beauty of Norfolk's photographs further compounds this issue. Norfolk sees his use of beauty as a tactical approach to 'penetrate through that carapace we build around ourselves that says I've already seen that [war photograph]'. (Norfolk, 2012). In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag seems to agree with Norfolk referring to the contention that 'a beautiful photograph drains attention from sobering subjects' as a 'common exaggeration' (Sontag, 2004, pp 68). I share this view.

In book form the photographs in *Afghanistan* are significantly mediated by text. The book's introduction, written by Norfolk, effectively sets out how the photographs should be read. He explains the symbolic significance of ruins bathed in golden light. He also describes the concept of his photographs as 'chronotopes'. The photographs themselves are shown without text, which could suggest that they are to stand alone as aesthetic objects (as in the gallery). Detailed captions are however provided at the rear of the book describing where the photograph was taken and what is shown. There is also an essay at the end that presents some historical information about Afghanistan. Overall, my sense is that in book form the work is comes over as documentary but not didactic. The viewer is allowed to use his or her imagination when considering the meaning of the images, but is prompted to do so within the context set by Norfolk's text.

Norfolk's website follows the format of his book providing textual information alongside the images. It also places his *Afghanistan* work within the context of his overriding project 'Et in Arcadia ego' (Norfolk, 2014A).

Afghanistan was well received critically winning the European Publishers Award for Photography in 2002. This was followed by an exhibition tour in the United States in late 2002. His work is shown at major art galleries around the world and commands healthy prices in the art market. He seems to have successfully bridged the divide between art and documentary by adopting a conceptually based approach, which is insightful, profound and highly politicised.

COMPARING FRANK AND NORFOLK

Although Frank and Norfolk's works are separated temporally and in style, the contexts within which they were produced share several characteristics that have a bearing on how their photographs ultimately create meaning.

- Neither relied on the prevailing tropes for representing their subjects. Frank's work is far removed from the conventional image/text photo essays of the late 50s. Norfolk's images bear little relation to the traditional style of war photography influenced by Robert Capa.

- Both were outsiders, able to look with different eyes at their subjects. Frank was a foreigner looking in on a new country - a foreigner who had witnessed persecution of minorities close to home. Norfolk worked alone rather than alongside the bulk of embedded war photographers.

- Both held strong beliefs that influenced their choice of subjects and style of representation. Frank was committed to a highly subjective and personal style, fostered by his association with the New York artist community. Norfolk was driven by strong political convictions and anti-war sentiment.

- Both photographers were free to produce their work without editorial constraints.

As a result, both *The Americans* and *Afghanistan* were radical departures from convention, confounding viewers' expectations and requiring active engagement in interpretation.

The photographers adopted differing strategies as regards presentation. In both cases however their approach had a significant influence on how the meaning is derived from their photographs.

Frank had always conceived of his work as a book, but not one in which the images serve to illustrate text or vice versa (although this is what happened when Frank lost editorial control of the publication of the Delpire version). Frank wanted the images to speak for themselves, individually and collectively. The work is positioned as poetically expressive by Kerouac's introductory essay and the photographs are presented with little anchoring text. As a consequence, whilst most agree that the tone of the work is harsh and sad, the images themselves have remained stubbornly opaque and have engendered many different interpretations.

Norfolk's original intentions for presenting his Afghanistan photographs are less clear. In practice the work has appeared in book form, in galleries and on the Internet. In book form, Norfolk contextualizes his work through accompanying text. The exhibition of his prints in art galleries however raises questions about how this influences meaning. On the one hand, it could be seen as presenting his work to an audience that might be more receptive and in a position to do something about it. On the other, it runs the risk of his photographs being viewed purely as aesthetic objects. Opinions are divided on the question of whether it is justifiable to represent serious subjects in an aesthetically beautiful way. Norfolk clearly believes that by doing so he is better able to gain an audience for his work.

LEARNING POINTS FOR MY OWN WORK

My investigations have demonstrated how a photographer's beliefs, interests and circumstances influence photographic meaning, sometimes unconsciously. To be honest I have not in the past thought through how this might apply to my own work. This is something I need to rectify immediately.

What also struck me about both of Frank and Norfolk was the way in which both took risks by approaching their subjects in an unconventional manner. Much of the power of *The Americans* and *Afghanistan* lies in their iconoclastic nature. The feedback from my OCA Advanced studies indicated that I need to be more creative. If I am to rise to this challenge then I need to take more risks, and not slavishly follow paths marked out by others.

I have also developed my understanding of how text works with photographs to create meaning. The textual contribution can take many forms: a context setting essay or statement, text included in the image panel itself, captions alongside images, captions in an appendix, a postscript. All of these work in different ways to anchor or open up the meaning. My major project for the OCA Your Own Portfolio course uses image/text panels. I need to assess carefully how the interplay between image and text works to create meaning. I also need to consider the wider use of text

within the work. Do I need to use titles? Should I consider a detailed context setting essay or statement? Do I need to include extended caption information to aid understanding and if so how should I do this? All of these factors need to be consciously considered when developing my approach for showing the work.

I have learned much from this critical review that I now need to take forward into my own working practices.

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