

Historical and Contextual Studies

Practices in Context

Dissertation Proposal

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As a brief context of my written dissertation proposal, I aim to explore the notion and practice of image distortion for the purpose of posting on Social Media. It's often described as a main cause of low self-esteem amongst the younger generation, and so I intend on targeting this concept, by exposing insecurities, and raising awareness of the drastic extent young people go to in order to conform to social standards. Following much deliberation I have chosen 3 key words and Images to research and explore in relation to my selected subject matter.

1. Self-Totalitarianism
2. 'CatFish'
3. Distortion

According to Oxford Dictionaries, totalitarianism is defined as 'a system of government that is centralized and dictatorial and requires complete subservience to the state', if applied to the self, self-totalitarianism, it specifies ones willingness to display our lives on a public platform such as social media and our subservience to common ideals, this could regard appearance or public persona. Whilst exploring totalitarianism farther, I discovered a novel titled 'Fahrenheit 451' (Bradbury, 1953), it details a young man whose role as a fireman is to burn all books, however after meeting a young woman he questions his actions and begins to rebel



against society, I found this particularly interesting as it challenges the entire concept of subservience, and totalitarianism as a result, and begins to support the aim of my dissertation – to challenge and rebel against the norms and expectations of the public. Another important aspect in the novel to consider is the tension and connection between ignorance and knowledge, the fireman's job is to eradicate knowledge and promote ignorance in order to equalize and promote equality and sameness, and so serves the same purpose as various social media platforms, to an extent. Another important theme throughout the novel is perception this is also a crucial element in totalitarianism, and photographer Ron Gilad (2011) portrays this in an image titled 'Mirror', he uses a series of mirrors as a means of exploring self-reflection. As an artist he presents the notion that a reflected image is only a projection of our superficial,

exterior. Many young adults have the opinion that our appearance determines how we are perceived by others, and that could in turn explain why so many individuals choose to superficially edit images, in order to fit in with what is considered an 'attractive' exterior, there could be many reasons for this choice. To support this statement, researchers at Rice and Houston University discovered that beauty has an unintelligible effect on success, Attractive people tend to earn an average of 3-4 per cent more than people with less visually appealing looks, according to Daniel Hamermesh, a professor of economics at the University of Texas. Good-looking people are apparently prone to creating higher sums of revenue for their companies, and are as a result seen as higher value employees. (Stranger, M. 2012). From this I derive a valid reasoning behind the need or wish to distort images, not only is it about self-doubt, but it's about becoming a successful individual, or the impression that it may lead to that.

Totalitarianism refers to a domineering government in which the state 'involves itself in all aspects of society, including the daily life of its citizens; it seeks to not only control economic and political issues, but the attitudes, values, and beliefs of those behind it', using a variety of cunning methods – sometimes involving military force. Rulers throughout time have attempted to exercise and maintain control over the lives of their many subjects, but it has been somewhat unavailable, and only with modern technology have governments acquired the means to control society; therefore, totalitarianism is, actually, a recent phenomenon. Having said this, it begs the question, is social media a form of mass surveillance? Created by innocent parties, monitored by law enforcement? This could be an interesting avenue to explore during my dissertation, and I personally, am intrigued by the possibilities insinuated (InfoPlease, 2012).

The term 'CatFish' has become common place in modern society, and it's mostly recognized as someone who creates a false online identity, and does not look in person as they do in their posted images, it's often used for the purposes of beginning a deceptive relationship. Somewhat shockingly, it is in fact so prevalent worldwide, that Psychology Today reports that over 53% of Americans have fabricated their online presence in some way (Matthews, H. 2018). By fabricating fake profiles on social networking sites, people deceive others into wholeheartedly believing that they are someone else entirely, and although editing images is only a small part of the problem, it still plays a large part in deception. These types of schemes were first brought to light in a 2010 documentary 'Catfish,' in which New Yorker Nev Schulman fell in love with a young woman's Facebook images and her voice during phone calls, he was shocked to discover however that he had been corresponding with a middle-aged wife and mother, he later turned the documentary into an MTV television programme, where he helps others solve the mysteries of their online relationships. These shows stunned the nation, and its title has since been added unofficially into the English language. MTV defines the term as a verb 'To

pretend to be someone you're not online by posting false information and media' (Peterson, H. 2013).

In one such episode there is a man who didn't fabricate any facts about his life, but only misrepresented his appearance, through edited images. He is overweight and claims that he didn't believe his victim would give him a chance at a relationship if he revealed his true appearance. Again, insecurity plays a huge part in the reasoning behind image distortion, and the satisfaction they must gain from having total control over the way that they are perceived by others (Catfish, 2013).



In an attempt to explain the term, Nev later speaks of how live cod are shipped along with catfish to keep the cod active and ensure quality, finishing by stating, that there are always catfish around to keep us lively, alert and active.

Another interesting multi-media recourse is the big-screen movie, 'Identity theft', although a comedy, it puts forward a serious and growing issue, and shows how one easy target discovers just how difficult it is to get your name and life back – an extreme version of catfishing, but a prominent one, Identity fraud has grown by 500% since 2000, and continues to grow at this pace every year. It is also believed that approximately 6 million people in the UK are victims of identity theft. It's also believed that those who earn over £60,000 are almost three times more likely to be victims of identity fraud (ABT, n.d)

In my opinion this digital art image by Kosmur (2008) accurately portrays the idea of cat-fishing an individual, by almost 'live painting' one's identity as they progress, its photo-manipulation is surreal, and virtually deceiving, much like the lives invented by editors.

Distortion is the alteration of the original state or characteristics of something or someone, Image distortion however encompasses the processes of editing and altering images, whether they are digital photographs, traditional photo-chemical, or illustrations. Developing software has made it ever easier for influential young individuals to operate and create plausible outcomes that they then display on public platforms to influence a younger audience and cause insecurity regarding appearance and body image, for example, more popular software such as 'Adobe Photoshop' and 'Lightroom' is readily available at an annual price, though the current market demands a more at hand alternative, such as the effortless 'Facetune' which I put to ample use when I created my Photo-book highlighting the same issue during a recent module. It's incredible how airbrushed an individual can appear and still be considered genuine. According to the Daily Mail 57% of Australian women admitted to editing their own images for social media, 18% of those women admitted that their profile pictures were unrealistic, however as a whole, somehow, 66% of women said they disagreed with magazines distorting images. Despite these telling statistics many celebrities have come under fire for using image editing apps for social media, for example the countless Kim

Kardashian scandals or the epic airbrushing of various sports illustrated swimwear edition shoots with high profile models. Clinical Psychologist Dr Vivienne Lewis said body image dissatisfaction is 'becoming more and more of a problem for women' and could be the reason



many are turning to aid this trend in its growth, and people with a large social gathering like those mentioned above certainly are not aiding the situation, by continuing to distort their images to appear as a so-called 'Perfect' Person. (Noble, F. 2015).

This image is one I took and edited myself. It is an image I would typically consider worthy of posting to apps such as Instagram, however it does not fit in with the current common ideals and standards such as arched eyebrows, extremely highlighted T zone, augmented lips, larger eyes, smoother hair – I have exaggerated all of these, and as a result look highly fabricated.

Triana Lavey, a 37 year old American, underwent a series of cosmetic surgeries in 2012, including fat grafting and chin implants, and has since sought additional surgery, including work on her Nose and Botox. She explained that she was most heavily influenced by the way she looked on social media sites and states 'I now have the face that I always thought that I had. I look like myself, but Photoshopped'. (N.A, 2014)

Many of these keywords possess key information that I intend on using in my dissertation, and I have discovered many valuable recourses, all in turn these have led me to a question that I find extremely fascinating and that I would like to research, explore and write more about next year. One particularly compelling honourable-mention avenue I discovered whilst writing this piece is the possibility of Public Networking being a form of totalitarianism, promoting government surveillance and social conditioning, a true conspiracy that I would enjoy digging into. However, after considering many similar possibilities, due to a severe lack in available research, and due to the fact that whilst looking into this matter I did not discover any answers to my queries and so I intend on contributing myself. I have chosen the question

'Does Image Distortion promote Cosmetic Surgery?'

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