

How does the photographer utilise documentary
photography and Photojournalism to control the
narrative surrounding Welsh independence?
The Contemporary Condition

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Abstract

Documentary photography and photojournalism can be utilised by photographers to control and create the narrative surrounding Welsh independence. Protests have always been a controversial topic in Wales, and photographers use this to their advantage.

Before photography was invented, colour theories and semiotics were utilised in art to control the narrative. Paintings and drawings were used to visually document events of Welsh independence and photographers have continued to do so.

In the early years of the Welsh independence movement, it could be said that the narrative that was portrayed by the photographers was more negative, compared to more modern photographers such as Ryan Thomas. Thomas uses documentary photography and photojournalism to control the narrative around specific protests including a *yes Cymru* march. Thomas creates and controls the narrative of this protest very differently in his work compared to other photographs depicting the subject of Welsh independence. Photographers utilise colour theory and other forms of semiotics to manipulate how the viewer perceives the subject of Welsh independence through photography.

By analysing how Ryan Thomas and other photographers use documentary photography and photojournalism, we gain an understanding of how photographers use the narrative to control the viewers perception of Welsh independence. This essay will attempt to answer the question, 'how do photographers utilise specific documentary photography and photojournalism techniques and tactics to control the narrative surrounding Welsh independence?'.

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Introduction

Documentary is a performance of memory. It is an enterprise of surveying, teaching, leaving traces, of making records, and thereby, not forgetting. As we know, records, like memories, can be lost, modified, or simply deleted (Butchart, 2013 p. 1)

Documentary photography and photojournalism are two methods of photography that are used and manipulated by photographers and artists to control the narrative of the photograph, and what the spectator understands about the situation being photographed.

The chapters within this essay will discuss ideas and themes about how documentary photography, photojournalism and visual art can be employed by a photographer to control the narrative through their photographs and focusing on the narrative surrounding the Welsh Independence Movement. Documentary photography is a form of photography that is used to create and control narratives that benefit certain groups of people whether it is political, class or opinions. The same can be said for documentary photography that documents Welsh independence.

Visual art has been used to document events; however, these forms of art can also manipulate how we view certain events. Art has been used to document wars and protests for centuries, from paintings and drawings in the early years, to photographs of modern protests. Protests for Welsh independence have been occurring for centuries. Currently movements like *Yes Cymru* are being well documented by documentary photographers, creating a narrative that is different depending on the photographer and the audience. Many people shape their own opinion on Welsh independence because of the narratives created by the media and the photographs of protests. This essay will answer the question 'How do Photographers utilise Documentary Photography and Photojournalism to control / create the Narrative surrounding Welsh independence?'. This essay will answer the question by

examining photographers and photographs that relate to Welsh independence and investigate the techniques that are used to control the narrative.

How is documentary photography and photojournalism used to create a narrative about Welsh independence?

Before discussing specific examples of documentary photography and photojournalism and how it is utilised to control the narrative surrounding Welsh independence, it is imperative to understand how documentary photography and narrative operate together. Documentary photography is used to create a narrative to fit a purpose, information, and stories from the viewpoint of the photographer. “The best documentary photograph is neither pure art nor mere fact. It is both. It evokes memories, elicits stories, and stimulates ideas” (Bogre, 2019, p.16). This quotation indicates that documentary photography documents both current and historical events. It also controls, creates, and tells a story that viewers may have never thought about before. Bogre (2019, p. 16) emphasises the unique properties of documentary photography that make it the perfect tool for generating a narrative. Bogre also identifies documentary photography itself as an art form that is used to tell stories. This signifies that documentary photography may not be unbiased. Stories can be known for exaggeration, as discussed by Cole (2019). Documentary photography differs from other forms of art because of its own unique properties (which will be discussed in later chapters) that are used to document specific events such as protests and other historical events.

Controlling the narrative: The early years

Documentary photography has produced many renowned photographers. According to the *National Galleries Scotland* (2023), some of the first examples of documentary photographers include Matthew Brady, Robert Adamson and Philip Delamotte. As time has progressed, magazines began to use documentary photographs more frequently (Newton, 2006). Documentary photographs are now becoming more popular with the introduction of websites and online magazines.



Figure 1, example of period illustration of the Rebecca Riots events, (N.D)

Documentary photography and photojournalism has greatly impacted the recording of campaigns regarding Welsh independence. Before photography was invented, paintings and drawings were used for visual recordings and to control the narrative surrounding historical events that are connected to Welsh independence (*figure 1*). Similarly in today's documentary photographs, artists have the ability to manipulate the narrative and may even display a distorted truth. *Figures 1 and 2* identify such differences that can occur within the narrative. *The Merched Beca* (also known as The Rebecca Riots) are a well-known group of Welsh men that dressed in traditional Welsh woman's clothing and destroyed the tollbooths

across Wales between the years of 1839 and 1843 (The National Archives, 2023). This event could suggest that the Welsh people were fighting for the independence to travel freely in their own country which has developed into the Welsh independence movements that we see today.



Figure 2, *Pan Ddaw'r Wawr (When the Dawn Breaks)*, (N.D)

Figure 1 is an illustration of the *Merched Beca* from the approximate period of the events. It is displaying them as aggressive with a negative narrative in comparison to the more modern artists interpretation in *figure 2*, who consider the men differently, and display them as strong and independent. The reason why the same movement has been represented in two different ways may be because the artists interpret the events differently, due to their political view and social environment.

Figure 2 includes many different shades of red and the colour red can be seen throughout paintings and drawings that are connected to Wales and Welsh independence. This signifies how the colour red has many influences as a semiotic. Melling (2019) states the colour red is

seen within our world and is included in designs such as road signs, because of it links to the natural world. For example, when the colour red is related to animals it often means danger or that the animal is poisonous (Melling, 2019). This suggests that the reason the colour red is associated with danger and limits is because of the natural environment (Melling, 2019). The colour red can be used to convey danger and stand as a warning within documentary photography and art. However, in different cultures and theories the colour red may suggest something completely different. Throughout Welsh culture, the colour red can be seen. It is possible to suggest the colour red is used to represent power and nationalism in Welsh culture, because of the connection with the Welsh national flag. Traditional clothing is red, the colour red is used for the national sport teams and, possibly the most important, it is the colour of the Welsh Dragon on the national flag. The red dragon is used to represent strength in Welsh culture (Johnson, 2017). This may be because of Owain Glyndwr (the last true prince of Wales) used the symbol of the red dragon when he was fighting for Welsh independence against England in 1400 (Johnson, 2017). It is possible that *figure 2* uses the colour red because it is associated with strength and power in Welsh culture. The *Merched Beca* were an important occurrence in Welsh culture and *figure 2* emphasises that using the colour red as a semiotic could be a key tool for the Welsh independence movement.

In addition to photographers, painters such as Meinir Mathias utilise techniques of visual documentary to control and change the narrative of the *Merched Beca*. Documentary photography has developed with time. “New technology has always challenged old perspectives” (Bogre, 2019, p.17). However, before photography was invented drawings and paintings were used to document events, alongside writing and word of mouth. This has evolved into film and now, digital. This development suggests that our view of historical events may differ due to the documentary photography technique available at the time of

the event. The painting by Meinir Mathias (*figure 2*) is an example of challenging old perspectives of the *Merched Beca* with new information and ideologies. We can also see that documentary photographers have developed and adapted with technology (Bogre, 2019). It is possible to say that people today are more likely to trust a photograph over a painting. For example, some people would believe the narrative created and controlled by Meinir Mathias because it was not photographed, and it was the only form of visual documentation available at the time of the event.

To conclude this chapter, it is possible to say that the illustration (*Figure 1*) is drastically different from the oil painting (*Figure 2*). *Figure 1* is older and portrays the *Merched Beca* as aggressive and violent people compared to the painting by Meinir Mathias, which was painted much more recently, and portrays the *Merched Beca* as brave and proud. A possible reason for the differences between these pieces of art is time. As time has passed the way that the Welsh view this historical event has changed and progressed, based on other experiences and battles for independence. Both art works depict the same historical event, yet the emotion, atmosphere, and ambiance of both are the opposite of each other, displaying how the artist can control the narrative of Welsh independence through their practice.

Ryan Thomas documenting Welsh independence protests.

Before discussing Welsh independence in documentary photography and photojournalism, it is important to understand the history of the Welsh struggle for independence. Wales was one of the first countries to be colonised by England (Johnes, 2019). The Welsh language is also one of Europe's oldest languages (Brain, 2023). Since being colonised, it has been

suggested that Wales has been oppressed and lost much of its original culture (Brooks, 2017).



Figure 3, Photograph of a Welsh independence march, 2022a

A campaign for Welsh independence has existed for centuries (Moore, 2007). Some people believe that Welsh independence is beneficial for the future of Wales, and others believe that Wales should not be independent. Photographs can use this differing opinion of the topic to control the narrative when they are photographing Welsh independence protests and marches. The viewer may be directed to a particular viewpoint based on the photographer's chosen portrayal alongside the viewers own bias. This can support the viewers bias or even alter their beliefs. Currently in Wales there are regular events, protests and marches for independence (Price, 2023). The *Yes Cymru* movement has been addressing the topic of independence from England and the United Kingdom since 2016 (BBC News, 2021). Many photographers have photographed and documented these marches. *Figures 3*

and 4 were included in an online article from *Huck* magazine (Huck, 2022). *Huck* is an alternative magazine aimed at a younger generation. The online magazine has articles about Palestinian independence in addition to Welsh independence, suggesting that the magazine has a more liberal political viewpoint. This also suggests that the magazine favours photographers who portray a liberal political view, thus support Welsh independence. Ryan Thomas is a photographer who is known for photographing protests and riots around the world (Thomas, 2023) and his work has been published in *Huck* magazine (2022).



Figure 4, Photograph of a child at a Welsh independence march, 2022b

The use of semiotics in photography by Ryan Thomas

In simple terms semiotics is the use of signs and symbols to create a narrative.

“The basic tenet of semiotics, the theory of sign and sign-use, is antirealist. Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs” (Bal and Bryson, 1991).

This suggests that everything within society is made up of semiotics. Documentary photography uses semiotics and viewers use semiotics to decode the photographs. This is evident in the photographs by Ryan Thomas (*figures 3 and 4*).

Using semiotics in photography is not as simple as using random signs and symbols.

“Semiotics have not yet agreed on a general typology of signs” (Nöth, 1990, p.107). This quote suggests there is no single specific semiotic. Many different theories focus on semiotics, which suggests that depending on the viewer and context of the photograph, different semiotics can convey different emotions and narratives (Van Leeuwen, 2001). It is possible the two most important semiotics depicted are the symbol of the dragon and the colour red. *Figures 3 and 4* provide examples of the colour red being used in modern documentary photography and photojournalism by Ryan Thomas to portray Welsh pride and strength. The colour red is seen throughout Thomas’s photographs, and including the colour red creates a powerful and positive narrative for Welsh independence. Even the buggy in the distance is red and the man in the background is wearing a red shirt (although not specifically a Welsh sporting shirt) which emphasises the semiotic of the colour red. It is clear that Thomas attempted to include as much red as possible in each photograph possibly to convey the power and nationalism of the marchers and Wales as a country. In *Figures 3 and 4* Ryan Thomas utilise the colour red similarly to how Meinir Mathias uses the colour in *figure 2*. Both Mathias and Thomas use the red to convey the strength of Welsh nationalism and identity.

The colour green is also an important colour used in semiotics for photojournalism. Thomas also made the conscious choice to photograph the protest when it was in the park. Braam (2022) states that it is possible to say that the colour green is used in media and art and to convey peacefulness and calm, which benefits the narrative that Thomas is trying to convey and control. By framing the protests surrounded by green grass and trees that this movement is a calm and peaceful protest and that it is a new beginning for a better future. Braam (2022) also identifies that the colour green is strongly associated with positivity. This can be a useful semiotic for when a photographer is trying to portray a protest or march as peaceful.

The choices

The photographer has the ability to control the narrative by what they decide to include in the photograph and how they edit the photographs. In *figures 3 and 4* Thomas has used soft and neutral tone colours to portray the narrative of an innocent and peaceful march. The way Thomas has composed the photograph also encourages the narrative of the protest being peaceful. It could be suggested that he has made a conscious decision to include people of different ages, including elderly and children, which could portray Welsh independence as a good option for families and for the future of young children. In *figure 4* Thomas made the choice to include a young child in the photograph to assert the narrative that the Welsh independence marches are peaceful, as young children are known for being a symbol of innocence. These small aspects in the photograph help to convince the audience to agree with the narrative that the photographer is trying to create. As previously mentioned, this photograph may not be pure fact but creates a particular narrative to tell a story (Bogre, 2019, p.16), and for Thomas it is a story about peaceful independence. Bogre

(2019) also stated that new technology facilitates challenges to historical viewpoints. The invention of photography gave the people of Wales a more convincing way to document the choice for Independence.

Reportage is an important aspect of documentary photography and photojournalism. It is a useful tool for photographers and media companies such as Ryan Thomas and *Huck Magazine* to control or create a positive narrative for Welsh independence. Reportage is telling a story through a set of photographs (Clarke, 2023). It is possible to say that Thomas and *Huck* utilise the technique of reportage to control the narrative of the protest by creating the sequence of photos used.

Photography as a political influence

It is possible to say that media such as *Huck* utilise photographs like these as a political influence. Whilst discussing how photography can influence politics, Kathke (2017) states “Photography, however, is always a deliberate act. One of including and excluding, of focusing and defocusing.” Kathke proposes that the photographer has control of their photographs and makes specific choices to create or push a narrative that fits their political stance. Thomas makes the decision to focus on the people (*figures 3 and 4*) to be more human based. This suggests that Thomas’ choice of what to include in the photograph and what to exclude is vital for creating and representing a particular narrative.

Ryan Thomas used these photographs for a positive article on Welsh independence protests for *Huck*, asserting a specific narrative for this political movement. Those who desire Welsh independence will photograph the protesters as brave, strong and fighting for something necessary. Documentary photography and photojournalism are used for politics but also social justice and change, influencing the ideologies of the viewer (Gajendra, 2019). This can

be seen in Ryan Thomas's photographs, where Thomas is utilising documentary photography to create and control a positive narrative for Welsh independence. This may support and create social change and justice for the people of Wales who support the Welsh independence movement.

Negative narrative of Welsh independence



Figure 5, Photograph of the destruction left by people protesting for a Welsh Television channel, 1980

Not all photographs portray a positive narrative of Welsh independence. It is possible to say that some photographers who have a bias against Welsh independence will make the conscious decision to focus and frame aspects of the events that could be considered

negative. Photographers can utilise documentary photography to create a negative narrative of Welsh independence. Before the *Yes Cymru* movement, individuals would protest and fight for Welsh independence in different ways (*figures 1 and 2*). These efforts were documented quite differently compared the work of Ryan Thomas today, often displaying a more negative viewpoint. For example, *figures 5 and 6* are from an earlier time period when the Welsh independence movement was not as accepted as it is today.

Figure 5 is a photograph from 1980 when people were protesting for a new Welsh language television channel (Doel, 2014). The unnamed photographer used these events to control the narrative on Welsh independence, displaying those at the protest as aggressive and therefore unsupported. As previously mentioned, Kathke (2017) identifies documentary photography is about choosing what to focus on and what to intentionally leave out. The photographer chooses to frame the destruction and the graffiti closely to focus on the negativity that could be linked to Welsh independence. It is possible to say that this photograph was used as a political influence to differ the opinions of Welsh independence.



Figure 6, Photograph from a protest for Welsh road signs, 1971

The semiotics of the colour red cannot be analysed in a black and white photograph but other colour semiotics can be identified. Some believe that black and white photographs are more likely to make the audience more emotional (Kowalczyk, 2019). Using black and white photography was a successful tactic used by those documenting the Welsh independence movement. By provoking strong emotions about their challenges, it is more likely that other people will agree with their narrative that they are attempting to create and control. By the 1970s colour photography had been invented and photographs depicted in figures 5 and 6 suggest the photographers made a conscious choice to photograph the event in black and white. Kowalczyk (2019) states that to strengthen the emotions in a photograph, shooting in black and white is a good choice. It is possible to say that the photographers made the

choice to photograph the event in black and white to persuade the viewer to feel more anger and distress about the situation. Boyd and Gorman-Murray (2022) state how black and white photographs have a nostalgic aesthetic. It is possible that the photographer utilised black and white photography to detach the viewer from the events to make them less personal.

As *figures 5 and 6* have a different narrative compared to *figures 3 and 4* it is possible to say that they may not be depicting an accurate narrative of Welsh independence. Rehman (2018) states that there is often a degree of competition amongst photographers to show their work quickly to be recognised in their profession, and this may influence if they will portray an event accurately. Rehman (2018) implies that a photograph may not be an accurate portrayal, narrating a distorted story because the media would rather publish photographs quickly and before other media outlets, rather than wait to create an accurate representation of the situation. This could be said for *figures 5 and 6* because they may not have represented the events accurately and wanted to create commotion and discourse surrounding Welsh independence within the media. It is possible to say that other photographers who may view Welsh independence differently will photograph the protesters negatively, which would encourage the narrative towards the people of Wales not favouring independence.

Analysing the photographs in the article by Doel (2014), it is possible to say that Welsh independence was viewed more negatively compared to today. This may be because of the way the photographers utilised documentary photography and photojournalism at the time. As Doel (2014) states, the photograph in *figure 7*, taken in 1971, was about the lack of Welsh road signs in Aberystwyth. Bogle (2019, p.204) suggests that documentary photography is used across different mediums to control narrative and focus on people rather than objects,

suggesting that capturing peoples emotion is important. Bogre (2019, p.16) continues to state documentary photography is used to tell stories. It is a mixture of both factual information and creative arts, and this can be viewed in this photograph. The photographer chooses to focus and frame the man being pulled and dragged by the other man, which was an artistic choice, but it is also displaying information.

“Always asking what a given work of art does to serve the interests of one’s own class – and making own images, both visual and non-visual ones” (Möller, 2019, p.3). As this citation specifies, the viewer must always be questioning why the photograph exists and who it benefits. This could also suggest that social class has an impact on how we view photographs. It is possible to debate that Ryan Thomas’s photographs benefit the working class. It can be assumed that the people in *figures 3 and 4* are working class because of their clothes and because the protest was located in the working-class town of Wrexham (Huck, 2022). By creating a positive narrative surrounding Welsh independence and the working class, it is more likely to influence the working class that Welsh independence is beneficial for them. Because the working class are the majority in Wales, it is important for visual images to appeal to the working class, regardless of the photographer’s own beliefs.

Möller (2019, p.3) states that art has a class bias, and thus can be viewed in *figure 6*. This photograph displays two people from different classes fighting, emphasising a class divide. Welsh independence protest photography often depicted the elite of society resisting the aggressive uprising of the masses, creating a negative narrative for those who want independence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, documentary photography has an important role in creating and controlling the narrative for Welsh independence protests.

Photographers have the ability to use a collection of specific semiotics, documentary ideologies, and techniques to control the narratives of certain protests and marches evident in media outlets such as *Huck* magazine. Photographers also utilise black and white photography in favour of colour photography when they wish to provoke stronger emotions and create a more dramatic narrative. Photographers also make use of colour theories, as mentioned by Baam (2022) and Melling (2019), to further control the narrative.

Photographers will also routinely use the colour red in photographs that have any sort of association with the Welsh independence movement.

The photographer will modify the way they take photographs of protests and marches depending on the narrative they are trying to create and control. During the 1970 and 1980s photographers utilised documentary photography to control and create a mainly negative narrative surrounding the Welsh independence movement. The Welsh independence movement has received a more positive narrative in more recent years, as identified through analysis of photographs by Ryan Thomas. Photographers can utilise colour palettes to control a certain narrative. The use of the colour red within the photographs of protesters has become more prominent and is used as an identification for Welsh independence.

Documentary photography is also important for the Welsh independence movement because the photographer can control and create the narrative that is favoured by the media. As previously mentioned by Bogle, photographers' photographs are a combination of fact and story, framed specifically to create or control a biased narrative.

The visual representation and narrative of protests for Welsh independence has become more positive as time has progressed. Photographers will continue to use semiotics and documentary photography techniques to frame specific aspects of events to control how the viewer generates an opinion and to control the narrative surrounding the Welsh independence movement.

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