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Documentary photography and visual activism

ADA5003

Lens-Based Image Making

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Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technological World?

In an ever-changing world with mutating viruses and contrasting governments, digital technology has come a long way. It's come a long way since 1989 when I was pushing buttons on a tv to change the channels, especially one night, to be amazed by seeing a man trying to stop tanks rolling down a street by waving his shopping bags at them. It's now possible to watch tv on our mobile phones which was unthinkable at that time.

The Tiananmen square massacre was a huge news story back then and a few documentary photographers managed to capture video and images of the so-called Tank man from a nearby hotel room. Some had to hide their camera films inside the workings of their hotel room toilets to stop them from being found by the Chinese governments henchmen who would later raid the place to prevent any knowledge of their wrongdoings. No one knows what happened to the Tank man and to this day it remains a mystery. Some think he was captured and killed by the police while others think he just hid his identity.

Digital SLR cameras were only just being released at the time and only held between 5 to ten images so possibly weren't practical. Quite astonishing then that in the 33 years since the world wide web (www) was created by Tim Berners-Lee, to meet the demand for communicating between universities and institutes around the world, that in universities in China, if you were to ask students to identify what was happening from a picture of the tank man, they would likely have no idea about it, its significance or the huge news storm it brought around the world. This being because the Chinese Communist Party in the People's Republic of China monitors and controls the internet, wiping out any history of protest.

The governments human rights violations continue to this day with the persecution and what some would call the genocide, of the Uighur people in China. The surveillance of this and other minority groups of people via digital technology is now moving forwards with tech giants such as Huawei attempting to introduce patents to identify people amongst images of pedestrians.

This technology in turn assists the government to detain many in forced-labour camps where children are being separated from their parents and women being raped is now being reported.

A more recent example of the Chinese governments cover ups and denial can be seen now in Wuhan where they have recently built an exhibition with empty hospital beds to show how successfully they've been able to deal with a virus which, according to them, came from anywhere but there.

The world waits in anticipation to find out what the actual truth is about the origins of the coronavirus and many of China's people wait in anticipation for a revolution, so they don't have to be stuck in a factory making goods under the threat of violence.



This persecution was highlighted in a film called A letter from Masanjia where a man called Sun Yi recounted his horrific ordeal in the Masanjia camp due to him being a practitioner of the Falun Gong movement. It's rather ironic that to highlight the government's mistreatment of this movement, Sun Yi goes to purchase a digital camera to take photos of the camp.

The original story began after he sent an SOS letter out from the camp in a Halloween ornament he was being forced to make. He didn't even realise what Halloween was at the time. The letter in turn, found its way to America where a lady picks it up when it fell out of said ornament, later reporting it to news agencies and human rights organisations. It's quite an incredible story. More so when you discover that when the news went viral in America, Sun Yi could only find out about it by using an internet backdoor to make sure he is not discovered by his government in China.

It is not known what exactly happened to Sun Yi but it is presumed that he was contacted by a government spy that is presumed to have poisoned him to death.



One artist that has consistently been a critic of the surveillance state has been the notorious and anonymous graffiti master, Banksy. As seen in the image above with his countryside CCTV on oil canvas, Banksy likes to highlight such issues through humour. Another of his works included a graffitied wall stating one nation under CCTV with a CCTV camera adjacent to it. He's also used his art in Palestine next to surveillance towers to raise awareness at the Palestinians continued persecution at the hands of the Israeli government.

According to Banksy "If you want to say something and have people listen then you have to wear a mask. If you want to be honest then you have to live a lie." The fact that it is not yet known who exactly Banksy is surely adds to the value of his work but from watching the film Exit through the giftshop it is evident that he has utilised digital technology to create his work in some shape or another. Whether it be to print out huge stencils he can then spray paint over quickly or when changing the Queens face on printed bank notes to use at music festivals!

He even highlighted the now throw away type society we live in with his artwork of a girl with a balloon eventually going through a carefully constructed shredder which was inside the frame. The artwork is now known as 'Love is in the Bin' and was sold for close to a million pounds. With warnings given recently for young people dressing up and smiling outside Auschwitz it could be argued that Banksy's piece of work will be an important one in the battle against the vain selfie trend that many pursue on apps such as Instagram.



It is not only China that monitors digital technology to manipulate and control its people though. Iran has also been reported as turning the internet off to stop the spread of information over the years. I witnessed this first-hand with my friend Sayyid who had not been able to contact his wife over the phone for a week or so. He became a refugee here after his son had a stroke in London and whilst visiting him, he found out that the regime back in Iran had arrested his wife and daughter for questioning, meaning his return could, in his words, mean a beheading.

The internet has however given us the ability to scrutinise and debate government actions in much of the world that does have efficient internet coverage. For example, unlike in 1989, it is now possible for me to pick up my smart phone and type a few words in to see that compared to the 100k+ deaths in the UK from covid-19, Australia has 909! It has on the other hand seen a huge rise in fake news stories fuelled by the fact Donald Trump became president and then used Twitter to rant and eventually get banned from.

Twitter also aided in the incredible Arab spring risings in the early 2010s. Starting in Tunisia with the Jasmine revolution the protests spread rapidly to Egypt, Libya and the Yemen, toppling many governments.

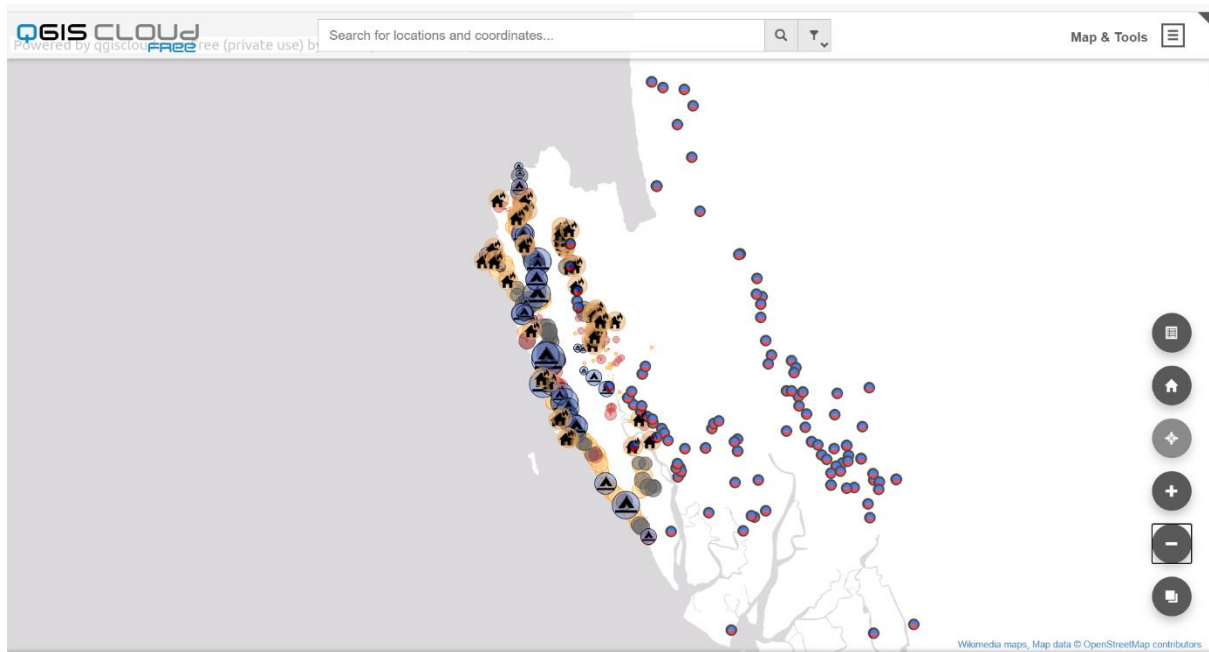
In Tunisia the government shut Facebook down for 16 days in August 2008 but was forced to back down after cyber activists threatened to close their internet accounts.

One of the many advancements in digital technology has been the rise in the use of satellite imagery and in particular Google earth. It was beautifully discussed by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his book 'How to See the World' when showing the picture of our world as a Blue Marble in a photo taken in 1972 from the Apollo 17 spacecraft and then again from an image in 2012. The difference being in 2012 that several images were stitched together using what is called 'tiled rendering' to produce the new 'Blue Marble' image.

Satellite imagery is now used regularly by government agencies and mobile phone users alike whether it be to monitor environmental destruction or to navigate to a new location. This technology was not available in 1989 and seemed like something out of Back to the Future back then.

One of its uses has been to assess destruction of land or property in conflict zone's such as Rohingya. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute released a report in 2019 highlighting the ongoing situation there. It used the United Nations Institute for training and research program called UNOSAT to show the destruction and to gauge if resettlement was possible with the ongoing military presence. They found 392 settlements that were burned, damaged or destroyed during 2017.

Their conclusion from analysing the satellite imagery was that it was not safe for the people to return due to more than 320 settlements showing no sign of reconstruction; that at least 40% of affected settlements have been razed; six military facilities have been built or expanded on former settlements and that demolition had continued in the years after 2017.



Even this week it is reported that the internet has been shut down as a coup occurred and the political leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been placed under arrest. It's an extremely concerning time for the people there after the devastation caused in recent years.

One artist that's been using some satellite images along with science and geography is Susen Reuter from Germany.



With the help of Prof. Dr. med. Christiane Schmullius, who analysed the radar data, Susen added colour from this image of the space shuttle Endeavour in 1994 over the Kruger National park to highlight ecological issues such as flooding.

Her other images highlight issues such as erosion in the African Savanna and changes in vegetation. Aerial photographs from aircraft are also used as part of her work to create colourful images highlighting climate change.

She states that the central themes of her artwork are the different perspectives on our planet; the unspoiled nature on the one hand and the anthropogenic influence on the other.

Another advancement in technology that is now shaping how documentary photographers capture images and video to highlight various issues is the use of the drone. Although aerial photography has been around for a while with the army researching new technology to fly over different countries to gain intelligence, the commercial use of the drone didn't take off until 2006 when the US approved the use of them in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.



The well-known Chinese artist and activist, who now works from Berlin, Ai Weiwei, utilised the technology to highlight the migrant crisis in his 2017 film *Human Flow*. One of the lasting images from the film was that of the life jackets that had been left on the shore after many people had arrived on the dangerous dinghy's they'd crossed the sea in. The drone begins low down filming just the one jacket and whilst moving upwards the scale of the discarded orange plastic becomes more apparent. Given that drones can go to places that humans can't it is a useful tool to see the world in a different perspective and from a different angle. The scale of landscapes is especially highlighted using this type of technology.



It is also evident that the artist has used the drone's in his more recent films, *Coronation* and *Cockroach* to highlight the situation's in Wuhan and in Hong Kong respectively.

From satellites, drones, mobile phone cameras to digital slr's and the use of pc's to view and manipulate images, digital technology is continuing to develop at a blistering pace. Camera megapixels continue to increase, and faster microchips mean digital imagery is becoming more and more advanced. App's such as Instagram and Flickr have undoubtedly seen a huge increase in online traffic over the last few years with the storage of these images increasing massively too.

Photojournalists have benefited massively from the advancements in the digital technology field in recent years, but the question of content is still as important as ever.

With YouTube channels such as PiXimperfect now dedicated to showing people how to use photoshop and lightroom to manipulate images the question, or rather the debate around it being morally right to alter an image is ongoing. As Michelle Bogre states in her book, *Documentary photography reconsidered*, many have lost their jobs or faced stern consequences for manipulating or copying certain images.

Who knows where digital technology will take us in future? Could drones be the next must have fashion statement like an iPhone? Will digital cameras be totally replaced by smartphones? Will we have contact lenses or glasses that will enable image making to eradicate the need to hold something in our hands to take a photo? Will it become easier to know if digital images have been manipulated in some way or another? These are just some of the questions that many digital technology businesses are trying to answer to enable them to profit but will this advancement in technology benefit us or will it hinder us? With climate change an increasing threat, migrants moving more regularly because of it and things like viruses, can digital technology help those in need and influence those in power to change policy so that our future is a safer and better place to live? Only time will tell but it is likely digital artists using drones and other new technology could well be at the forefront of highlighting these important issues.

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