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Programme of Study: Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

Module: ADAD5004

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Keywords: Reputation, Ethics and Documentation

Word Count ex. Bibliography and Figure List: 2,416

Dissertation Proposal: Reputation, Ethics and Documentation

Within my proposal, I will be discussing three keywords: reputation, ethics, and documentation within the context of documentary photography. I have always been interested in how photojournalism has changed from what it used to be, especially with the rise of tabloid magazines and paparazzi taking charge in recent years. I have also been interested in how society has turned its backs on the industry due to the cliché of journalists asking too many questions or going to extreme lengths to manipulate the information or just to gain money. I have picked these three words because I think that there is a relevant connection to the subject matter and include plenty of discussion points that could possibly convince people that just because there is this label and stereotype within the industry, it can be challenged and that it is not entirely true. You could say that my question as well as the keywords in which I have picked are plagued with controversy and hypocrisy, but I am willing to argue for what I think is correct. Throughout this body of work, I will be referencing artists and theorists who are alike within their subject matter. Creating evidence to back up my question.

Reputation

Firstly, I will be exploring the keyword of 'reputation'. There are many definitions of the word 'reputation' but while studying, I stumbled across the book *Reputation: What it is and Why it Matters* by Guilia Origgi. She says that "the favourable or unfavourable opinion that the public holds of someone or something." (Origgi, 2018) Therefore, the concept of reputation seems to be built upon opinion. Today, reputation, as well as opinion, is particularly important, I want to battle the belief of reputation in certain industries such as the journalistic and documentary. There are many opinions to be had in reference to the subject matter and it is especially important as human beings for opinions to be shared. My personal experience with reputation has always been that it is important how others think of you, everyone else's views matter and you need to listen to others to become a 'better' person. Coming from a small seaside town, I either knew everyone or am related to everyone, thus enabling me to constantly feel trapped and scared of other people not agreeing with the things that I get up to in life. I have since taught myself that this does not matter, and I should do what I want to do, how I want to do it without listening to other people and turning into the person I do not want to be. Professional reputation is especially important though. In the workplace, you do have to be a different person on the social side of you. To connect with the right people to progress within my career. Working hard is important, depending on others is not. Stereotypes should be shaken, today boundaries, as well as stereotypes, are constantly changing and being challenged. Although, there is something titled an 'artist's reputation':

“The artist's reputation and the attention they receive from the media: An artist's reputation is measured based on their perceived importance in the history of art and/or their degree of innovation. Moreover, the amount of press an artist receives as well as the number articles and books published about their work will all help contribute to the artist's legitimacy, reputation and worth.”. Within my research, I have found one of the photographers within the fashion industry who has the worst reputation. Terry Richardson. Despite being a fashion photographer, and one of the most successful celebrities and fashion photographers in the world, as well as the creepiest, these two characteristics are not mutually exclusive. The fashion industry does have a bad reputation, my source from the Guardian states: “People accuse the fashion industry of a lot of bad things, many of which are justified: it fetishizes thinness, it worships youth, it is occasionally racist, and it is aimed at the phenomenally wealthy. (I am not even going to deal with the oft-trotted nonsense that gay male fashion designers like skinny models because they're trying to make them look like little boys because people who make this claim seem not to understand the difference between "gay" and "paedophile" and therefore are not worthy of anyone's time.) (Freeman, 2013). This quote furthers my point of reputation within the photography industry despite focusing on fashion. Richardson's work is in my opinion overly sexual and a bit weird.



Figure 1.

“...you'd immediately notice that he was never trying to be just a plain documental photographer. He induces a lot of what's done for the camera: partying, vandalism, love, sex, nudity—that when it's not himself who's in the picture, invading the frame with his hands or his penis, turning the camera to himself or even outsourcing the shooting.” (Spadoni, 2020).



Figure 2

Despite the creepiness within these images, you could argue that the technique that Richardson uses is interesting, the source I have used says:

“In short, the answer is: the photos are Terry's even in the radical cases when he's not even shooting them—and that because Terry frees the photographer from the camera, he establishes his authority in a different manner than we're used to: not by triggering the shutter but by triggering the events to be photographed. I mean: Terry Richardson's photographic gesture is itself happening, performance—not only in the sense that he organizes an event and shoots it but that his own gesture of photographing is itself a performance.” (Spadoni, 2020) We can admire his talent through this technique, but it is not an excuse for the arguable debate of where his morals lie. Despite having this ‘bad’ reputation upon his name, and the allegations of abuse, he still works in his own way to create art. The fact that his reputation has essentially broken down his career really opens your eyes to see how big of an impact on your life reputation really is.

Ethics

Secondly, I will be approaching the keyword of ethics. The definition of ethics is: “ethics, also called moral philosophy, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles.” (Singer, 2018) To have correct ethics and morals is a judgement of character that explores right and wrong, ethics within the photographic industry are particularly important, they manoeuvre a person's decisions. The most interesting thing about ethics is that every person's ethics are different based on their life experiences and values. There are many varied factors that can decide a person's ethics. Such as geography; what may be acceptable to document and/or broadcast within the UK might have an opposite effect if broadcasted in countries such as North Korea. There is also a battle of ethics when it comes to editing documentary photography. It is common for documentary photographers to avoid editing their photographs and staging the scenarios depicted within their photographs. In my opinion, you need a correct set of morals to keep in touch with humanity while staying connected to the purpose that you want to achieve by documenting a

particular event in history. Francesco Scalili wrote an article for allaboutphoto.com titled 'The Moral Image'. While discussing the Beirut explosion of 2020. "...the idea of 'morality' is down to the photographer's intention and practice. It is of course expected of photojournalists to record the events of a situation, but I believe it is down to the individual to recognize where the line is. And more specifically, recognizing when your practice inhibits someone else's. I believe that the idea of morality when photographing the aftermath of natural disasters, war, famine... is solely down to the photographer's approach, understanding and empathy towards the subject that is being documented. In many cases, what can be considered as 'good photographic practice' no longer exists. The lines between what can and cannot be recorded are somewhat overshadowed by the need to take what's in front of you. 'Good practice' just becomes: 'practice' and moments where a photographer has the opportunity to record something truly impactful, he or she must judge the situation and decide how to approach and empathise with the subject that will be recorded. It is of course a matter of impulse, a decision to take an image that is emotional yet far from dispassionate." (Scalili, 2020). Irish Documentary Photographer Richard Mosse took a series of photographs titled 'Infra' or 'The Enclave'; these photographs are the perfect example of how documentary photography can battle a person's ethics. Even though the first perspective of the photograph is beautiful. But the political undertones behind the photograph do have a significant impact. It shows the viewer to see the world for what it



really is. Despite the beauty, there is war.

Figure 3.

I love this series. It really reflects and teaches me how to correctly achieve what I want in the future with my photojournalism. Something beautiful with a shock factor embedded behind the scenes. The spark of inspiration for an idea that can change society's views. The fact that this situation within Congo is so overlooked and ignored by mainstream media is a shock. It needs to be talked about and put to an end, so many people have lost their lives. Is there any need for this?



Figure 4.

Documentation

My last keyword is Documentation. Documentation is very important at this moment in history. Every day is filled with constant information to consume. "...But documentary photography allows such moments to occur, as well as contemplation, consideration, and, maybe, action. These photographers, dedicated to documenting the world around them, gently apply the brakes on this accelerated world and capture the stories of things left behind. Many of the issues facing people and the planet today are slow and inching forward. While others are far more rapid." (Copp, 2016). In order to define documentation photography is quite difficult as it is a very broad subject. There are many different types of documentary photography, the Tate London website says: "Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage". (Tate,2017). The impact that documentary photography has had on the world is quite astounding. Documentary photography is usually capturing a moment in history that is significant due to its socio-political issues going on in the world at the time. The most important thing to remember within documentary photography is that images are truthful. Unless an artist approaches their documentary photography in an unethical way, then they can be cryptic to understand. I adore the complexity of documentation. Despite at the forefront there being something beautiful, the viewer really needs to get involved and study the photography. It is arguable to say that documentary photographers are expected to capture the news and various events etc. but without the use of editing and directing what they are capturing. As I have previously mentioned, photographs are truthful. I like how strong documentary photography has stood. In a time where photo-editing technology is thriving, it is hard to just not use it with your work, attempting to keep the art as minimally touched as possible. I have always been encouraged to edit my photographs, but I like this approach of not editing. It encourages a message on censorship and how to control what is documented, but that is a conversation for another day. In my opinion, I feel like if documentation is overly edited, the intended impression is ruined. I always think that if you are manipulating the photograph in order to just create a story is unethical, practically wishing war and harm on innocent people. Scaring the

public into thinking the world around them is falling apart when the photographs are staged and there is nothing to worry about. That is the danger with documentation these days, you never truly know if you are looking at the real image or the fake one. You never know if the real image is going to resurface in the future looking completely different to the photograph that you felt a strong connection with. Photography can be misleading; these works by the Bronx Documentary Centre opens my eyes to photography over the years and what has been manipulated



just to create a reaction from the public.

Figure 5.

This image contains Kim Jong-il posing with soldiers of the 534th unit of the People's Army. Western publications suspected Jong-il was digitally inserted into the photo. Rumours had been circulating that he had fallen ill or died, but the Korea Central News Agency released images showing their leader healthy and active. In a way, this photograph is a positive but a negative image. Obviously with the undertones of war and you need to dig deep into what these people do for a living is quite shocking and upsetting, but for their leader to be happy and healthy is a positive. In this case, if there was a use of digital insertion, I would not say is in my opinion ethical photography. Political figures are a big impact in the world and for any of them to die would be a big shock for the country they are from, which would then lead to a replacement and the possibility of the country going into turmoil due to the wrong leader having a different system from the last.

Conclusion

To conclude, I think that my keywords do link together, and my studies show that each word is important, reputation and ethics go together quite easily in my opinion, they link by showing that if you have unethical work (perhaps like the work of Terry Richardson) then it will essentially give you a negative reputation. Documentation links also because of the battle of ethics within the subject matter. You always must think of the possibilities and the impressions and impacts that photography has. You need to ensure that the information within is correct and truthful. I want my research question next year to revolve around the reputation of photojournalism and documentary photographers and

whether the industry is doing the correct thing nowadays. There have been many reports in the media recently that have perhaps been chopped and changed and I think it is inappropriate. Leading me to the question: "How has the reputation of the photojournalism industry changed over the past 50 years?" This question allows me to study the history of photojournalism while seeing how different modern society is in comparison to the past.

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