

Research in Practice
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Introduction

In this essay I will be discussing the ways in which the themes of integrity, narrative and flaneur, play a part in the developmental process and perception of imagery in documentary photography. The aim is to examine the responsibility each topic holds in the practice and product of photographers, briefly touching on external influences and the importance of intrinsic value in art. Topics to be considered are how important is staying genuine in both the way a photographer works as well as the image produced and how does the ability to stay truthful effect the narrative of an image? These themes will be explored through three key photographers. Firstly, Miroslav Tíchy who demonstrates how integrity is core to his own practice. Secondly, is Lorenzo Meloni who illustrates how strong and sometimes difficult imagery can affect a narrative. Lastly, I look at Henri Cartier-Bresson whose practice has challenged processes and perception. Cartier- Bresson's imagery helps us explore flaneur within the ideas of truth and reality in documentary photography.

Integrity

Integrity can be defined as a demonstration of honesty and moral convictions in one's character (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Integrity has the capability to challenge photography and those involved, raising the query that it may not be possible to simultaneously stay true to our own moral compass, whilst showing the harsh reality of the story. Thus, can this result in turning a blind eye to an uneasy subject matter and the feelings of the viewer? In documentary photography, it is important to recognise the influence that is held within the image. The camera poised, how the image is framed and ultimately the subject, are all curated to achieve an element of storytelling, of which truth should be a core element. This is especially considered when our work is being interpreted and perceived in different ways by the viewer. The photograph is an 'interpretation of the real' (Sontag, 2005,

p.119); it is unlike a painting of which both are an 'image', whilst a photograph is also a 'trace'.

The truth or integrity of an image can be altered by the environment in which it is situated in, with the space impacting on the perception of the image.

In contrast, it is sometimes the photographer that wants and welcomes the varied interpretations of the public, as their photography is geared towards what the audience can take from the 'viewer experience'. This could be because there is not an emphasis on the 'true context' of the imagery. However, just because a photographer may not be 'truthful' in the most literal sense, this does not mean they lack integrity.

Integrity is core to my practice, making sure to show the truth of the matter. Whilst I strive for the image to tell the truth it resonates with me that I have the opportunity to manipulate an image to steer a viewer into a specific narrative.

Integrity, as previously established, is often demonstrated by one's confidence in their principles. This can be observed through the works of Miroslav Tíchy. The environment and circumstances in which Tíchy's work was taken, in current society could be deemed as questionable; 'the subject of his photographs, obsessively photographed female bodies' (Lenot, 2009), and in particular when we consider the artistic apparatus he used. Tichy's bricolage camera, consisted of 'salvaged materials and scraps' (Lenot, 2009), in many ways only merely resembling a camera, and therefore it seemed that the vast majority of his female subjects, were somewhat blissfully unaware they were being photographed at all (de, 2014). Miroslav Tichy had the opportunity to censor his work through photographic process but instead expressed the situation through his own thought. Seemingly opting to highlight the

sexuality of his subject matter, Tichy stayed true to his own creative outlet by taking advantage of the privacy of others. Perhaps Tichy found truth to be relative.



Figure 1 Miroslav Tichy (n.d) *Untitled*

Tichy's photos are blurred, as if encompassed in an aura that allows our imagination to fill in the blanks, often typically drawing in pencil around the curves and outlines of the body because the blurring is so pronounced (Tichy, 2011, p.26). The integrity of the photographer can also be perceived in their imagery, in how they alter their work. This can ultimately

reconstruct an images' content and context, as proposed by Terry Barrett; 'do not manipulate images' as he explains it only results in the deception of the audience and possible falsehood, or rather fabrication of a subject (Barrett, 2020, p.29).

Despite Tíchy's controversial approach to photography and subtle distortion of images, his work is clear and has 'nothing to do with the vagueness that enshrouds contemporary thought' (Tichy, 2011, p.26). Similar to many other artists, Tíchy had become an 'outcast', gaining a profound realisation that he no longer had anything to lose and risked everything, thus proceeding to create his art, for no one but himself. His work became his own autobiography, never ceasing to express himself through his work (Tichy, 2010). Tíchy remained truthful to himself, his philosophy and approach to his practice.

Narrative

The narrative of an image is fundamental to documentary photography. The 'story- telling' aspects of photography, can be defined as the description of a series of events, often in order to explain or understand these experiences (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Another characterization of narrative from David Herman, is 'a pattern-forming cognitive system that organizes all sequentially experienced structure, which can then be operationalized to create tools for thinking' (Herman, 2003, p.170–171). Narrative can be seen as a 'fundamental system' to our mental processes, as it is something we engage with when both reading and understanding imagery (Battye, 2014, p.36).

To better understand the role of stories told through photography, it is important to explore how narrative challenges adversity. The most challenging images are of difficult and unpleasant situations (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). The modern media and news outlets are

one of the primary resources where examples of documentary photography, focusing on current global issues, would be found. News is recognisable as ‘non-fiction’, however this does not mean that it will not use ‘narrative’ (Fulton, 2005, p.140), possibly altering the ‘true’ situation, in order to benefit an ulterior motive. Documentary photography can be a form of ‘story-telling’, but is defined as a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events (Tate, 2017). Whilst documentary photography can strive for representation ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ it can also hold capacity for altering opinion and manipulating the viewer.



Figure 1 Lorenzo Meloni (2014) *An IS Chechen commander and his group killed in action by YPG, Ayn Al Arab, Syria*

Lorenzo Meloni, is an Italian photographer, who is known for his imagery of conflict, and subsequently its effect on people and the landscapes. He aims to challenge the

‘complex narratives’ that surround war. He does this by processing and reflecting on both past and contemporary social, political and cultural contexts (Magnum Photos, 2020).

Meloni’s photography comes from a position of hindsight, inviting the audience to reflect on the ‘destructive patterns of human behaviour’ (Magnum Photos, 2020). It has a ‘narrative’ that depicts how history is repeating itself.

Figure 2 is an image of an IS Chechen commander and his group killed in action by YPG (People's Protection Units) fighters in Syria. The image clearly displays an ‘arrangement’ of the deceased, positioned in formation, with their rifles propped behind them. Is it necessary for this to be photographed? There is an option for censorship, whereby Meloni could have chosen to use the same narrative, without the use of disturbing imagery, or rather of people that can consent. However, his photography uses truth as a means to educate. The purpose is for people to gain knowledge of these complex conflicts, that are vastly documented but often remain a ‘mystery’ for the general public to comprehend (Magnum Photos, 2020).

It is widely acknowledged that the news and in a broader sense, the media, aim for their photography to catch your eye. Similar to Meloni’s image (fig 1), news imagery holds value in its shock factor, which is potentially why its narrative is intense.

The problem is not photojournalism per se, but it is wider. The way of communication in general today runs at an impossible rate of assimilation. Everything has to be of immediate impact and everything has to happen in the time of a click or between one scroll and another. At the moment, even images seem to require too much concentration, so we have switched to short clips of just a few seconds to understand terribly complicated subjects.

Lorenzo Meloni (Magnum Photos, 2020)

Photojournalism has been affected by the way social communication has altered over the years. However, there is a 'negativity bias' when it comes to what catches our attention, where a recent study has found that people respond quicker to negative language and visual stimulus (Stafford, 2014). This could potentially be why photojournalism has adapted to create imagery that is far more insensitive than what is essential to the narrative of the story, to gain traction. Likewise, Meloni has to adapt to an audience that can understand and feel engaged with the narrative, whether that be a positive or negative response, as it is simply a 'basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change' (Herman, 2009, p.2).

Flaneur

The flaneur, a French word, that can be defined as someone who walks around, who saunters, observing society (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). In this particular context a flaneur in photography is no different, however could be categorised as someone who has no destination in view, following their own and 'untrodden' paths. This became a more notable and well recognised concept, when Charles Baudelaire depicted a high appraisal of the flaneur in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1963. The flaneur can be depicted as "a solitary urban stroller who strives to come to terms with the ever-changing 'modern condition' through the observation of everyday life in the city" (Gluck, 2003, p.53).

Baudelaire described a flaneur more simply as the 'ideal modern artist' whose role was multifunctional, adopting the positions of a traveller, observer, philosopher, moralist, and commonly a novelist, recording these moments in time (Baudelaire, Mayne 1995, p.4). The flaneur photography has, in many ways become a platform for urban narratives, a major influence within the arts, as well as, urban culture, as it has been a way to visualise and

explain the experience of the spectator. When the photographer proceeds on a psycho-geographical drift, a *dérive* or un-navigated walk (Debord, 2012), they are drawn into events and situations, whereby they capture the unanticipated. This could be described as ‘the decisive moment’, in other words, a moment which provides a captured event with significance. It has the potential to hold expression and depth in narrative.



Figure 2 Henri Cartier-Bresson (1932) Behind the Gare Saint Lazarre

Henri Cartier- Bresson, a flaneur and a French documentary street photographer, introduced us to this concept known as the decisive moment. It can be simply described as the exact and

somewhat perfect timing in which a moment is observed through the lens, when all the comprised elements are captured, forming an image of significance. Cartier- Bresson's idea of the decisive moment was dependent on a split second. The precise moment in which the observant photographer notices a balanced scene, clicking the shutter just in time. The decisive moment could be unexpected and spontaneous, catching the photographer off guard (Bair, 2016, p.148).

Figure 3, is known as 'Behind the Gare Saint Lazarre'. It is a composition which captures a man jumping over a small puddle and his reflection standing in the undisturbed, still water. When you look closer, the concept of this image expands, unfolding a narrative when the audience notices the positioning of the man in the background poster. It echoes the stance of the leaping man in the foreground. A repetition of symbols is a technique which helps depict more than what meets the eye. It can be used to evoke emotion and questions, or to create a surreal or humorous effect in a narrative of image (The Art of Composition, 2020). The framework of this captured moment, projects movement and draws in the viewer to envision the entirety of the scene; it is successfully portraying a story.

Cartier-Bresson's legacy has originated from his capability and photographic skill to suggest that, his celebrated collection of film shots, were all taken at opportune moments. This is significant because it is to create a perception that as a flaneur, you are capturing life as it is unfolding, in real time. As a result, a flaneur uses a single image that reveals a narrative and fundamentally a representation and context of life itself. However, the audience can understand that to capture the perfect image in one take is improbable. It is forgetting or misinterpreting one of the most important stages of the process; selecting the image. The best

image that conveys their ideas, which is difficult to achieve in a single photograph (Bettina, 2015, p.18). Cartier-Bresson states

Photography is not like painting. There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera. That is the moment the photographer is creative... Oop! The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone forever.

(Bernstein, 2004)

It would seem an integral part of Bresson's practice was comprised by this notion of being a wanderer of the city, a person documenting these intimate compositions that were defined with a curious narrative. In spite of this, it is widely understood that this 'decisive moment' could be seen as somewhat a fallacy. It is rumoured that many of Bresson's images were in actuality, staged or instructed (Smith, 2004). In light of this, Cartier-Bresson's photographs are not precisely 'objets trouves', a moment or object found by chance (Merriam-webster.com, 2023), and question whether they still classify as documentary or even street photography. The integrity of Cartier-Bresson's photography is somewhat diminished if there is difficulty in distinguishing between the truly 'candid' and the 'manufactured' image. It becomes harder to recognise if the scene photographed holds the same significance. Regardless, the work of the flaneur has provided the audience with images to temporarily allow themselves to admire something that is not true, a suspended disbelief (Merriam-webster.com, 2023). If the aim of the flaneur is of curiosity and uncovering a life of significance, is truth an essential element?

Conclusion

In summary, the words; integrity, narrative and flaneur, relate in discussion to what can create an engaging and ultimately veracious image. These three key words can all have influence on

a story and the images produced, each linking in with one another, exploring topics of truth and process. Integrity whilst a 'demonstration of honesty' frames the subject thereby defining the story for the viewer. The photographer in this situation creates a narrative aligned with their own social and moral convictions. The story arguably becomes a representation of another's interpretation; 'truth is relative' creating a narrative for the viewer to engage with. The flaneur creates their own narrative, wandering often with no destination creating a narrative that embodies the journey or the development of a person. The way the photographer captures their images and the methods used can change the way the image is perceived. The viewer can recognise the truth behind the process, but their opinion of the image arguably will be affected by the subjectivity of the photographer. The process to creating the image in addition to how it is perceived and understood by the viewer has led me to the question.

Is it a photographer's responsibility to consciously acknowledge and take ownership for how their images are received by an audience?

In my independent research paper, I will be studying the notion of documentary photography as a platform for genuine visual narrative. I will be exploring the relationship between images, discovery and the processes within photojournalism.

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