

Keywords: Protest, Activism & Climate Change.

Ben Evans 1911027

Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

Research in practice (ADAD5004)

Word count: Approx. 2493

Proposal

My current practice and work have revolved around climate change and the imagined effects of it in 2050 if we do not act now to reduce carbon emissions. I am keen to explore the themes of activism and protest in context to art, photography and music to see if it is possible to create a change or shift in societies thinking regarding action on climate change. I intend to discuss these keywords and attitudes to them over history and through various movements. I will also look at three key images in synthesis with three artists or thinkers in relation to the keywords which will enable me to develop a question for my dissertation.

Protest

According to the Cambridge dictionary (protest, 2021) the definition of protest is a strong complaint expressing disagreement, disapproval, or opposition.

Protest has long been a way for people to raise their voices and concerns that they have about things such as change in the law, human rights violations and discrimination. One of the earliest examples of protest in Europe came around 1517 in Germany with Martin Luther's great movement of resistance against the Catholic church. The Reformation as it is commonly known began with Martin Luther writing and then posting his ninety-five theological theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg in protest of the Pope's sale of reprieves from penance, or indulgences. Martin Luther utilised the power of the press to get his message across during this movement (The Reformation, 2021). Many of the German artists of the time illustrated their support for the movement with images showing their opposition and anger over Rome's actions (McQuiston, 2019).

Protest has changed quite a bit from 1517 and the use of the press with artists depicting sometimes crude images to oppose the Catholic church. The use of mobile phones, the internet and social media has enabled people to organise protests far easier than they once could and can now reach more people with their message.

Of more recent protests the biggest came in 2003 with people taking to the streets to voice their displeasure about the war in Iraq. According to the Guinness book of records the largest of these meetings was in Rome with around 3 million taking part in the peaceful event (The largest protests in history, 2021). I was proud to attend the march through Swansea at the time with around 300 others.

Of the protests utilising modern technology especially it was thought for many years that the Arab Spring risings in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and others were facilitated using twitter and Facebook. This is disputed however and according to Tunisian academic and

writer, Haythem Guesmi, social scientists have repeatedly busted this myth and have offered critical readings of the role these tech companies have played in the political unrest there. He argues that the tech giants might well have inhibited the organising of the protests rather than helped them and that they use the protests to counter criticism that they do not do enough to regulate their platforms (Guesmi, 2021).



Iraq War Protest 2003

One of the greatest thinkers in relation to protest was Henry David Thoreau who refused to pay the poll tax in America in July 1846. He believed it was unjust for him to pay as the funds would go towards the Mexican - American war and the slave trade which he detested. After his one night in jail, he wrote an essay called Civil Disobedience which was later said to influence Mahatma Gandhi in his fight against British rule and then others such as Martin Luther King in developing a form of protest now known as nonviolent direct action (The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. – Henry David Thoreau, 2021).

So, what has protest achieved? Many pose this question, which is a fair one, when debating whether protest is a successful means of producing change. Although it did not stop the Iraq War in 2003 it did help raise awareness of the opposition to it. Successful results from protest were however gained from actions such as Rosa Parks refusal to give up her seat to white passengers on a bus in America which later resulted in a supreme court ruling that segregation on public transport was unconstitutional. Another of course was the Suffragette parade in 1913 that led to women having the right to vote seven years later (5 Peaceful Protests That Led to Social and Political Changes, 2021).

One of the biggest issues facing society right now is that of climate change and there have been several protests over the years to highlight the ever-growing threat of it. Extinction rebellion are now known in many countries as being the group of people leading the way to combat it. In April 2019 six of Extinction Rebellion's protestors caused £25000 worth of damage to Shell's HQ in London's Waterloo by smashing windows and gluing themselves to

the windows and blocked doors. The intent of this damage was to raise public awareness of Shell's complicity in the climate and ecological emergency. On the 23rd of April 2021, the six activists were acquitted by a jury and found not guilty of all charges in what is seen as a landmark verdict (BREAKING: The XR activists who took on oil giant Shell - and won - Extinction Rebellion UK, 2021).

Activism

According to the Collins dictionary the definition of activism is the process of campaigning in public or working for an organization in order to bring about political or social change (Activism definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary, 2021).

It could be argued that protest and activism are the same thing, but activism includes many other routes to change such as boycotts, petitions, strikes, sit-ins or hunger strikes. It could also be argued that protest has evolved over the years into activism as protesters have adapted their means of protesting to achieve their goals. The Global economic crisis in 2008 and Globalization could have pushed this evolution (Giugni and Grasso, 2019)

Historically activism has achieved success with its aims in areas such as the civil rights movement.

One of the more interesting pieces of activism came from Mexico in the 90's with the Zapatista movement. With the imminent implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) coming into force on the 1st of January 1994 which would risk the indigenous peoples of the area losing their land to private companies the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) or Zapatistas as they then became known decided to take up arms against the government. Their message was also spread electronically via fax to newspapers around the world. Their struggle was to preserve their way of life and to demand jobs, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace (The Zapatista Army of National Liberation in cyberspace — [ANTI]MATERIA, 2021). The Mexican government fought back and after eleven days of fighting around 300 lives were lost before a cease fire and negotiations started. The Mexican government granted the indigenous people the right to self-determination and a level of autonomy in the Chiapas region where the EZLN initiated their demands (The Zapatista movement, 2021). The Zapatista's later adapted the methods of their activism by becoming involved in online discussions and hacking to gain more support for their cause (The Hacktivist Digital Zapatismo, 2021). The Zapatista's popularity in the communities they were fighting for did not go unrecognised and murals depicting the struggles soon came to adorn the walls in the area. It is thought that the Mayans started this tradition previously, but the Zapatista's murals have often been recreated in other countries and depicted in similar artwork (A brief history of the Zapatista murals - Editorial - SP-Arte, 2021).



Zapatista mural

Activism has also been a huge part of many musicians work over the decades. In Wales we saw many inspired by the Welsh folk singer Dafydd Iwan's song Yma o Hyd which is used by the Llanelli Scarlets rugby team before and during their matches. The song itself speaks of how the Welsh language and people are still here regardless of everyone and everything they have had to endure (Welsh language song Yma O Hyd tops iTunes UK song chart, 2021).

Pussy Riot are one of the most famous female activist music groups in recent years and have garnered media attention across the globe for their outspoken performances. Beginning in 2011 they are fierce opponents of Vladimir Putin's presidency in Russia. Many of the groups' members have been imprisoned for their actions such as a protest against human rights abuses which they carried out on the pitch of the World Cup final in Moscow (Who are Pussy Riot? A guide to the Russian activist group who crashed the World Cup Final, 2021).

Another band that has long been involved in activism has been System of a Down. The group have been campaigning for recognition of the Armenian genocide that happened between 1915 – 1922 with members having relatives that survived the atrocity (System of a Down's Serj Tankian: 'If something is true, it should be said', 2021). The recognition of the genocide from an American viewpoint came on the 24th of April 2021 after President Biden honoured

all the Armenians that were killed in the genocide that began 106 years to the day (Biden becomes first US president to recognise Armenian genocide, 2021).

A common speaker on activism, Noam Chomsky has discussed many issues facing the world such as the NAFTA that had huge implications on the Mexican people. He described it as a reconquest of the country and that the Zapatista's rebellion was in response to the taking away of their land, resources and hope (Interview with Noam Chomsky, 2021). In a recent interview Chomsky spoke about the challenges the world faces in relation to climate change. He stated that the race to change things had been encapsulated by scientists with a doomsday clock. This clock was now 100 seconds from midnight which if reached, he said, would mean that we would face the termination of the species (6th Yoshin Lecture: A Conversation with Noam Chomsky, 2021).

Climate Change

According to National Geographic (2021) *'climate change is a long-term shift in global or regional climate patterns.'*

Climate change became apparent to society in the 1930's as the winter's grew milder and people questioned the weather. Scientists had been aware of the changes since the 1850's and many were ridiculed by newspapers over the years for their different theories. One of these was Guy Stewart Callendar who, in 1938, brought evidence to the British Meteorological Society after he had analysed the temperature of the earth over the previous 50 years and concluded that the increase in temperature was due to Carbon dioxide emissions. Callendar thought that the temperature rise would be a good thing and prevent us from returning to the ice age. His work is now known as the Callendar effect and is now recognised as a valuable contribution to understanding climate change (Fleming, 2013).

After the civil rights movements of the 1960's many of the protesters joined the green movements efforts to highlight climate change with the first Earth day on April the 22nd, 1970. It is noted that 20 million people protested environmental destruction across America. The event helped to raise awareness of the issues facing the world and the organisers did manage to get rid of 7 members of Congress after highlighting their poor environmental records (Yeo, 2021).

With the science and technology continuously evolving to be able to predict climate change and its effects, attitudes have also changed. Interest and concern about the consequences of climate change has increased dramatically and with it, young people have taken to the streets, often skipping school to bring attention to what they perceive is their stolen futures (This decade broke all kinds of climate records—and not in a good way, 2021). One of the young people leading these protests of course has been Greta Thunberg who started her school strike for climate in 2018 by encouraging other students to skip school and demand action from governments (Greta Thunberg turns 17 today. Here's how she started a global climate movement in just 18 months., 2021).

An interesting and relatively new thinker on climate change has been Bill Gates. In the Spring of 2015, he decided he needed to do more about the issue and to speak out more. A group of college students in the US were holding sit-in protests to demand that their schools' endowments divest from fossil fuels and with it came a news article in The Guardian newspaper calling for the Gates foundation to do the same. It was not until 2019 that Bill

Gates divested all his direct holdings in oil and gas companies, but it seems it was a decisive moment in him realising that he needed to take the situation more seriously. With the Coronavirus hitting in 2020 it is interesting to note that greenhouse gas emissions were only reduced by around 5%. In his book *How to avoid a climate disaster* he discusses what needs to be done to get to Zero greenhouse gas emissions and why it is so urgent (Gates, 2021).

During 2020 alone we have seen the impacts of climate change on many countries with the fires in Australia, America and flooding in Bangladesh. The six years since 2015 have been the warmest on record with 2011-2020 being the warmest decade on record (Climate change indicators and impacts worsened in 2020, 2021).



Amazon rainforest Orangutan

Proposal plan

Protest has long been a means to create change. It has been a big topic of discussion in the last year alone with the Black Lives Matter movement in particular dominating much of the headlines after the killing of George Floyd in the US. Extinction Rebellion are now also in the news quite regularly with different protests around the world to highlight climate change.

Sit-ins such as the ones in America to stop schools investing in the fossil fuel industries and boycotts such as the ones talked about for events like the Olympics to raise awareness of human rights abuses also seem to be common news stories recently. Activism in different forms seem to be evolving to enable change or at least bring better awareness to issues.

Climate change will undoubtedly mean that activists and protesters will continue their campaigns until more is done to combat the issue of reducing greenhouse gases.

Having engaged with and evaluated the three keywords - protest, activism and climate change, a proposal question has been created which encapsulates all three. For my proposal I intend to pose the question: How can protest and visual activism influence global climate change? The sub questions for this proposal would ask: What are the current attitudes to climate change? and: Has visual activism impacted different rights movements in the past?

Reference list

- Dictionary.cambridge.org. 2021. *protest*. [online] Available at: <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/protest>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- HISTORY. 2021. *The Reformation*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/reformation>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- McQuiston, L., n.d. *Protest!* (2019)
- Theweek.co.uk. 2021. *The largest protests in history*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theweek.co.uk/102885/the-largest-protests-in-history>> [Accessed 10 May 2021].
- Guesmi, H., 2021. *The social media myth about the Arab Spring*. [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/27/the-social-media-myth-about-the-arab-spring>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- Big Think. 2021. *The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. – Henry David Thoreau*. [online] Available at: <<https://bigthink.com/politics-current-affairs/philosophy-civil-disobedience?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- Global Citizen. 2021. *5 Peaceful Protests That Led to Social and Political Changes*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/peace-protests-dallas-response/>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- Extinction Rebellion UK. 2021. *BREAKING: The XR activists who took on oil giant Shell - and won - Extinction Rebellion UK*. [online] Available at: <<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2021/04/23/breaking-the-xr-activists-who-took-on-oil-giant-shell-and-won/>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- Collinsdictionary.com. 2021. *Activism definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/activism>> [Accessed 4 May 2021].
- Giugni, M. and Grasso, M., 2019. *Street citizens*.
- [ANTI]MATERIA. 2021. *The Zapatista Army of National Liberation in cyberspace — [ANTI]MATERIA*. [online] Available at: <<https://anti-materia.org/the-ezln-in-cyberspace>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].
2021. *The Zapatista Movement*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/news-item/the-zapatista-movement-the-fight-for-indigenous-rights-in-mexico/>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].
- Youtube.com. 2021. *The Hacktivist Digital Zapatismo*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-U-he8LN3k>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

SP-Arte. 2021. *A brief history of the Zapatista murals - Editorial - SP-Arte*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.sp-arte.com/en/editorial/a-brief-history-of-the-zapatista-murals/>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

BBC News. 2021. *Welsh language song Yma O Hyd tops iTunes UK song chart*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-51083459>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

NME. 2021. *Who are Pussy Riot? A guide to the Russian activist group who crashed the World Cup Final*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/who-are-pussy-riot-russia-activist-group-world-cup-final-pitch-invasion-2354987>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

the Guardian. 2021. *System of a Down's Serj Tankian: 'If something is true, it should be said'*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/mar/24/serj-tankian-system-of-a-down-armenia>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

the Guardian. 2021. *Biden becomes first US president to recognise Armenian genocide*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/24/joe-biden-armenian-genocide-recognition>> [Accessed 8 May 2021].

Youtube.com. 2021. *Interview with Noam Chomsky*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apfgfG-Gmp4&t=1s>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

Youtube.com. 2021. *6th Yoshin Lecture: A Conversation with Noam Chomsky*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGsUh3dOF0c&t=500s>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

Society, N., 2021. *Climate Change*. [online] National Geographic Society. Available at: <<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/climate-change/>> [Accessed 5 May 2021].

Fleming, J., 2013. *The Callendar Effect*. Boston, MA: American Meteorological Society.

Yeo, S., 2021. *How the largest environmental movement in history was born*. [online] Bbc.com. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200420-earth-day-2020-how-an-environmental-movement-was-born>> [Accessed 5 May 2021].

Science. 2021. *This decade broke all kinds of climate records—and not in a good way*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/the-decade-we-finally-woke-up-to-climate-change>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

Business Insider. 2021. *Greta Thunberg turns 17 today. Here's how she started a global climate movement in just 18 months*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.businessinsider.com/greta-thunberg-bio-climate-change-activist-2019-9?r=US&IR=T>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

Gates, B., 2021. *How to avoid a climate disaster*.

World Meteorological Organization. 2021. *Climate change indicators and impacts worsened in 2020*. [online] Available at: <<https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/climate-change-indicators-and-impacts-worsened>>

2020#:~:text=It%20has%20recently%20been%20rising,continued%20to%20increase%20in%202020.> [Accessed 9 May 2021].