



Serena Killen – 222097

Research in Practice (ADAD4004/C)

Photography and image Manipulation

In today's digital age, images have become abundant across multiple platforms (Wang, X., & Hu, Q., 2023). However, alongside this accessibility lies the widespread use and manipulation of images, often without proper acknowledgement or consent. As an individual whose images have been appropriated and manipulated across various platforms, this is a significant area of interest and the essay aims to unravel the complexities surrounding using and manipulating personal images, focusing on three keywords: Authenticity, Documentary, and Narrative.

The concept of authenticity lies at the heart of photography for this individual. However, in an era dominated by digital manipulation and image appropriation, the line between authentic representation and manipulation has become increasingly blurred. By examining instances where images have been used without consent or altered to fit different narratives, the aim is to explore the notion of authenticity in contemporary Photography. Through a backwards approach, the study will dissect how authenticity is both upheld and compromised in the digital form, shedding light on the challenges photographers face in maintaining the integrity of their work. By focusing on the themes of Authenticity, Documentary, and Narrative, it aims to shed light on the ethical, social, and aesthetic implications of image appropriation and manipulation, ultimately challenging our perceptions of Photography in contemporary society.

Photography has long been a powerful tool for documenting reality. However, the rise of digital manipulation has raised questions about the reliability of photographic

documentation. By interrogating the role of Photography as a documentary medium, it is possible to analyse instances where images have been repurposed to construct false narratives or manipulate public perception. This study will also investigate the ethical implications of image manipulation in shaping our understanding of reality, challenging the notion of Photography as an objective form of documentation (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 2003).

Images can convey compelling narratives, shaping perceptions and understanding of the world. When images are manipulated or appropriated without consent, the narratives they convey can be distorted or misrepresented (Senfft, 2010). Tracing the trajectory of images across multiple platforms and contexts, creates an opportunity to explore how narratives are constructed and deconstructed through Photography.

Authenticity

In Photography, authenticity refers to several related concepts that hinge on the genuineness, honesty, and accuracy of the images produced and have included two significant definitions, one exploring documentary authenticity the other artistic.

Documentary authenticity and artistic authenticity in photography highlight different approaches to capturing and interpreting reality. These concepts evolve with technological advancements, cultural shifts, and ethical standards (Dagamseh & Suyoufie, 2021). Documentary Photography aims to provide a truthful representation of reality, similar to journalism, historical documentation, and social commentary. It

emphasizes accuracy, objectivity, and factual integrity, aiming to depict events or subjects without manipulation. However, digital photography and editing tools challenge the traditional boundaries of documentary authenticity, making it difficult to achieve complete objectivity.

Artistic photography focuses on personal expression and creative vision, valuing emotional truth and the photographer's imprint on the work. Artistic authenticity is subjective and changes with cultural trends, artistic movements, and the artist's personal evolution. Both forms of photography influence each other, and their standards of authenticity are continually redefined. The concepts of documentary authenticity and artistic authenticity in photography highlight different approaches to capturing and interpreting reality. These concepts evolve with technological advancements, and ethical standards (Vissers & Wagemans, 2023).

These aspects of authenticity underscore a difference in what it means for a photograph to be authentic, reflecting the different purposes and philosophies within the field.

Authenticity refers to a photograph's perceived truthfulness, genuineness, and realness. This concept is multifaceted and can involve the context in which a photograph is taken, the intention of the photographer, and how the photograph is presented and perceived by audiences. Additionally, it is often debated in terms of its relationship to reality, the manipulation of images, and the broader cultural and historical context.

Susan Sontag was a profound critic and theorist of Photography. In her seminal work "*On Photography*" (Sontag, 1977), she explored the implications within a modern society. Sontag argued that photographs can shape and influence our understanding of reality, often pointing out the inherent power dynamics involved in taking and

consuming images. For Sontag, Photography has the potential to both reveal and obscure truth.

Sontag states “Photographs” are seen “as a way of collecting the world”; Sontag suggested that through Photography, we collect and possess the world in a new way, which can be both empowering and problematic. She also states “The uncertainty of photographs”; where it is emphasised that photographs can simultaneously be seen as objective records and subjective interpretations. Furthermore, that photography has an “Influence on memory”; within this section Sontag argues how photographs affect memory, both preserving and altering perceptions.

Another theorist who is known to confront authenticity is Joan Fontcuberta.

Fontcuberta is a contemporary artist and theorist known for exploring the truthfulness of photographs. Fontcuberta often creates works that blur the lines between reality and fiction, challenging the viewer's perception and questioning the authenticity of photographic images.

Fontcuberta (2014) discusses that photographs can be manipulated to create fictional narratives; this emphasises how easily images can be misleading. He also highlights the photographer's role as a recorder of reality and creator of said world. Fontcuberta furthermore, encourages viewers to approach photographs with scepticism, so that the viewer can acknowledge their potential for deceit.

Fontcuberta challenges traditional notions of documentary Photography by questioning its claims to truth and objectivity (Moreiras, 2017). Through his art, he often creates

fictional narratives that blur the line between reality and fabrication. Additionally, emphasising that all Photography, including documentary, involves some level of manipulation and interpretation. Through constructed realities he suggests that documentary Photography can never be entirely objective, as photographers make choices about framing, timing, and context that shape the narrative. Employing the photographer's role as a way to encourage viewers to critically analyse documentary photographs, recognising the potential for constructed realities and biases.

The possibility for deceit is further explored through works by Fred Ritchin. Fred Ritchin is a notable commentator on the future of Photography and its digital transformation. In his book *"After Photography"* Ritchin (2008) explores the implications of digital technology on the authenticity and credibility of photographic images.

Ritchin discusses how digital technologies have made it easier to alter photographs, raising concerns about the authenticity and reliability of images in the digital age (Horaczek, 2021). Ritchin also discusses the democratisation of Photography and highlights how the digital revolution has democratised images making it accessible to many and complicating the notion of authenticity. Furthermore, Ritchin also discusses ethical considerations and goes into depth to explore the implications of digital manipulation and the responsibility of photographers and media outlets to maintain authenticity.

Sontag, Fontcuberta, and Ritchin's discussions collectively underscore the complexity of authenticity in Photography. Sontag's analysis provides a foundational understanding of how photographs interact with reality and memory. Fontcuberta challenges the viewer to recognise and question photographs' inherent subjectivity and potential

deception and Ritchin brings a contemporary perspective, addressing the impact of digital technologies on the authenticity of images.

All three thinkers agree that photographs can influence and shape our perception of reality, but they also highlight the potential for distortion and manipulation. Additionally, with the evolution of photographic technology, from analogue to digital, this has had significant implications for authenticity as digital manipulation poses new challenges for determining the truthfulness of images which is likely to develop with Artificial Intelligence.

The obligation to act responsibly is crucial, amid the continuing debate on the role of photographers and media in maintaining the authenticity and integrity of photographs, especially in situations where images are susceptible to easy manipulation (La Caze & Nannicelli, 2021) such as through the use of Photoshop or again through AI.

Authenticity in Photography is a complex concept. It involves a continuous negotiation between the photographer's intention, the context of the image, and the audience's interpretation. The works of Sontag, Fontcuberta, and Ritchin provide critical insights into understanding and navigating these complexities.

Documentary Photography is an area that records actual events, environments, and cultures, often focusing on social and political issues. The primary objective is to provide a truthful and accurate representation of the subject matter, often to inform, educate, or advocate for change. Documentary Photography is rooted in realism and typically avoids manipulation to maintain the integrity of the depicted reality.

Documentary

In photography, a document is a photograph that records and preserves visual information about a particular subject, event, or scene. These images serve as a visual record, capturing moments in time to provide evidence, information, or a historical account. It also means that a document is to record and convey information, ensuring that details are accurately captured and can be referenced later. Documents can take various forms, such as writing detailed descriptions, taking photographs, making video recordings, or compiling data. Photographs can communicate complex ideas, emotions, and stories more powerfully and quickly than words.

Through photography, documenting allows the distribution of information and experiences to a broad audience, often translating language barriers. Also, it serves as evidence of events, conditions, or changes over time. Documentation is essential in legal situations, scientific studies, journalism, and different forms of investigation. In various fields it has critical functions also, in our everyday lives, providing a reliable method to record, organize, and maintain information for a range of purposes. various fields it has critical functions and in our everyday lives, providing a reliable method to record, organize, and maintain information for a range of purposes.

Susan Sontag explored the complexities of Photography in her work "*On Photography*" (Sontag, 1977). Her analysis of documentary photography centres on the ethical and philosophical implications of capturing reality.

Sontag discusses the ethical responsibilities of documentary photographers, emphasising the need for sensitivity and respect towards their subjects, as this impact perception. She argues that photographs, including documentary images, can shape

and sometimes distort our perception of reality. Sontag's aestheticisation of suffering criticises documentary Photography's tendency to enhance suffering, which could potentially lead to voyeurism rather than empathy and action. Documentary photography within war or world events such as famine are cases in point.

Sontag, Fontcuberta, and Ritchin's insights provide a comprehensive framework for understanding documentary Photography. Their perspectives highlight the characteristics of truth and interpretation, ethics and aesthetics, and the impact of technological advancements. In the discussion Truth vs Interpretation Documentary Photography aims for truthfulness, but photographing and presenting images involves subjective choices that can influence the narrative. Documentary photography carries a significant responsibility, especially concerning how subjects are depicted and the possible effects on viewers.

Technological Influence Advances in digital technology have transformed documentary Photography, offered new storytelling tools but posed challenges to maintaining authenticity and trust.

Documentary Photography is a complex and evolving field that requires careful consideration of ethical, philosophical, and technological factors. Sontag, Fontcuberta, and Ritchin's works provide valuable perspectives on the difficulties and duties encountered by documentary photographers in their quest to represent reality truthfully and effectively.

Narrative

Narrative photography is a type of Photography that tells a story or conveys a sequence of events through images. Unlike single, standalone photographs, narrative Photography often involves a series of images that create a cohesive and engaging narrative (Kalmene, 2021). This can contain various styles and approaches, from photojournalism and documentary photography to conceptual and staged Photography.

Susan Sontag extensively examined Photography's cultural and ethical dimensions in her work "On Photography" (Sontag, 1977). While she did not focus exclusively on narrative Photography, her insights into the power of photographic sequences and their impact on viewers are relevant.

Critical Points by Sontag:

Photographs as Evidence and Memory, Sontag discussed how photographs serve as evidence and contribute to collective memory, mainly when presented in a sequence that constructs a narrative. Furthermore, Sontag discusses the power of storytelling through sequential images. She acknowledged that a series of photographs could tell a story in a way that a single image might not, providing a broader and more refined context, particularly regarding the representation of subjects and the potential for manipulation.

In Foncuberta's narrative works, he often blends reality and fiction. His perspective is crucial for understanding the constructed nature of narrative Photography.

Fontcuberta's work often challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction, suggesting that narrative Photography involves a degree of fabrication and interpretation. He argues that all narratives are constructed narratives, including those

told through Photography, which are controlled by the creator, who decides what to include and exclude.

This is further explored by Fred Ritchin, who focuses on the impact of digital technologies on Photography, particularly in narrative forms. His insights are essential for understanding how narrative Photography evolves in the digital age. Ritchin explores how digital technologies enable new forms of storytelling in Photography, such as interactive and multimedia narratives and digital storytelling that enhance viewer engagement.

Narrative involves creating a constructed reality, where the photographer selects and arranges images to tell a specific story (Meyer, 2024). This process inherently involves subjective choices. Narrative within photography, can include the truthful representation of events and also be manipulated for storytelling purposes. The impact of digital technologies have transformed narrative Photography, offering new tools and methods for storytelling.

Narrative is a powerful medium for storytelling, conveying complex events and emotions through images. However, it is also a constructed form that requires careful consideration of ethical and technological factors (Welle, 2021). The insights from Sontag, Fontcuberta, and Ritchin provide valuable guidance for navigating the challenges and responsibilities of creating and interpreting narrative Photography.

In today's digital age, the abundance and accessibility of images across multiple platforms have introduced complex ethical, social, and aesthetic challenges regarding the use and manipulation of personal photographs. By focusing on the themes of

authenticity, documentary, and narrative used with photography we can better understand the implications of these practices.

Authenticity remains a crucial yet contested concept in Photography, complicated by digital manipulation and appropriation. Documentary Photography traditionally seeks to represent reality accurately, but the rise of digital manipulation has questioned its reliability and objectivity. With its storytelling power, narrative Photography reveals how constructed realities can shape perceptions, though it also faces challenges in maintaining truthful representation.

The works of Susan Sontag, Joan Fontcuberta, and Fred Ritchin offer critical insights into these issues. Sontag emphasises the power and uncertainty of photographs in shaping memory and reality. Fontcuberta challenges the perceived truthfulness of images, advocating for a sceptical approach to photographic narratives. Ritchin highlights the transformative impact of digital technologies on Photography, calling for ethical considerations in maintaining image integrity.

By tracing the trajectory of personal images across different platforms, this essay aimed to dissect how authenticity is upheld and compromised, interrogate the function of photography as a factual medium and explores the stories created through image alteration. These explorations will highlight the broader implications of image appropriation and manipulation in contemporary society, ultimately challenging our perceptions of Photography.

This research has led to the question, how does digital manipulation and the appropriation of personal images impact the notions of authenticity, documentary integrity, and narrative construction in contemporary Photography?

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