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Research in Context

ADAD5003

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Question 5 :

From the **Lens-Based Image Making** research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess themes, Key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Word Count - 2273

List of Illustrations

- Fig 1 – Image of Princess Leia and Jaba the Hut
- Fig 2 – Annie Leibovitz, Donald and Melania Trump (Vogue, 2006)
- Fig 3 – Gregory Crewdson, Twilight
- Fig 4 – Gregory Crewdson, Twilight, on set shot
- Fig 5 – Gregory Crewdson, Twilight
- Fig 6 – Gregory Crewdson, Twilight
- Fig 7 – Gregory Crewdson, Beneath the Roses
- Fig 8 – Gregory Crewdson, Beneath the Roses
- Fig 9 – Kruger
- Fig 10 – Kruger Advertisements
- Fig 11 – Hughes (My own work)
- Fig 12 – Hughes (My own work)

Technology in our world has developed to a level we had never anticipated just half a century ago. It is constantly changing and improving, not necessarily for the good, but keeping up with this technology and using it is a pre-requisite of being successful in any field of work this day and age.

Technology is used in every walk of life, from business to schools, transport to governments, and it can also be a major part of art and design. I will be discussing and showing examples of Lens-based image makers, Namely Annie Leibovitz, Gregory Crewdson and Barbara Kruger. All three are very successful in their individual work, and yet they have a mixture of differing subject matter and styles. Crewdson's work utilises Modern Technology on a large scale to assist with his Photography work, Leibovitz also uses Technology, largely Post production however her subject matter is usually

the complete opposite to Crewdsons, and Krugers work is usually made up of poor quality, yet hard hitting images. I wish to discuss their styles, themes and how their work influences us.

Annie Leibovitz

‘Capitalist Realism aims at visually overwhelming the viewer, to celebrate its underlying ideology, while preventing a viewer from considering any alternative’(Fuller 2017)

I want to start with discussing some of Annie Leibovitz work, that she made for Vogue magazine in 2006, the images are of a stereotypical famous capitalists, surrounded by their wealth and fruit of their so called labour. The image of Trump in his Super-car in front of his plane and pregnant Wife, Melania, is of course the controversial, as it is technically brilliant, however the context of the image creates a lot of controversy, predominantly negative. I like the comparison of the other image accompanying this, shown below, one taken from a Star Wars film, of the Vile, greedy Leader, showing off his Sex slave, convinced in his own mind that this is a symbol of power. The irony of the images is uncanny, and yet the context is alarmingly similar.



Fig 1



Fig 2

Unfortunately, I feel the general public, me included, only see this as total arrogance, someone who is mentally stuck in a medieval time, and genuinely convinced that this type of propagandised scene will attract admiration. I also won't be so naive to think that Trump isn't slightly aware of this, but he

undoubtedly believes that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and as long as it gets people talking about him, good or bad, then it can only be beneficial to his immortality, which unfortunately may well be true.

From a feminists point of view, the image is a disgrace, it goes against everything they stand for, as it portrays complete inequality in the way Trump is the master and Melania is his possession, however I can see that this does get deflected by the fact that Melania is proud to be pregnant and this is emphasised by her skimpy bikini and boastful stance.

This is a great example of how Photography can, in some ways, be more powerful than words, as it allows for individual opinions to run wild and leads to topical debates on many different levels, and all without saying anything verbally, just visually.

I feel that the image could be looked at in 3 different viewpoints. The first of which being Trump knew that Leibovitz was renowned for her work with celebrities and he wanted to be a part of it too. The second being that Leibovitz, although apparently not Trumps biggest fan, accepted the commission as it would enable her to carry out her work yet being able to simultaneously have a dig at Trump without it being obvious e.g. The comparison of Leia and Melania donning a gold bikini, and then from a third perspective, Trumps advisors would have known that the image wouldn't

glorify Trump to the general public, however they know how to work the propaganda machine and knew that 'All' publicity is effective as long as it gets people talking.

This image is a good example of that, as I am sure the negative opinions outweigh the positive, yet it was still used as a small cog in Trumps Media machine and successfully helped steer him towards his egotistical dream, that of becoming the most powerful man in the world.

Gregory Crewdson



Fig 3

Gregory Crewdson is an American Photographer; he mainly captures American Homes and Neighbourhoods. The context of the images is in total contrast to Leibovitz work, as the subject matter is usually showing down

and out areas of America, and portraying peoples misery and sadness.

He has a Cinematic and dramatic style and all of his pictures are elaborately staged using Film like Crews that are more familiar with that of Motion Picture and use film equipment and techniques.



Fig 4

I think he aims to create an aesthetically pleasing photo that is open to interpretation, and by using a few people seen to be showing some form of strong emotion he asks the question “what is going on?”..

The key to his photographs is the lighting, no expense is spared and each shot is set up meticulously.

Every angle, every prop is looked at with a fine toothcomb, and like I mentioned no expense is spared, as they are high cost productions that have a high cost reflected in the price to purchase such an item.



Fig 5

Personally, lots of his images remind me of classic Sci-Fi Films from the 80's and 90's, such as E.T. and Close encounter of the Third Kind, where big bold lighting techniques were used, and this really satisfies my artistic hunger as not only does it bring back many memories of my youth but it also inspires me creatively as it shows what fantastic imagery and atmospheres can be created with a lot of thought and work.

I really like his style of work, and would love to emulate something similar, I love the whole setting up and staging of a photo, the bigger the better,

hopefully this could be one of my future projects.

He is clever in the way that he leaves so much to the viewers imagination, but plants a few seeds within the image that allows a free reign on ones imagination to take over. I'm sure the image above utilises the scene from lots of typical Sci-Fi movies to instantly plant the thought of Extra Terrestrials, or Aliens, or even some kind of contact from deep space, where the person has been chosen and about to get abducted by spaceship.

“Given his preference for elaborately produced photographs, in which the supernatural plays a central role”(Crewdson 2005)

This is definitely a predominant theme in his work, where they are very dark and eerie, concentrating on the ‘forgotten about people’ of America, as I mentioned earlier, the complete opposite to Leibovitz choice of subject matter.

The image is set in a typical suburban American Village, nothing grand, just very typical, and just by having the leaves swirling around under the light instantly insinuates a force from above hovering over the subject.

“To consider a photographs internal context is to pay attention to what is descriptively evident”(Barrett 2000)

My favourite collection of Crewdson's images is from his work titled ‘Twilight’. They are all very different in the scenes, yet they are all closely connected in the way that they make you feel whilst observing them. The

amount of thought that has gone into the lighting stands out whilst studying the image, bringing in parts of a scene that would normally go unnoticed, and nearly every image having a strange going on that is very open to possibilities. They are all heavily filled with 'props', again leading to many assumptions, yet none of them giving you an end, a finish, like a film would.



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8

At the back of his book, *Twilight*, it gives you a very good insight into the ‘behind the scenes’ work that goes into his images (See Fig 4), and the amount of people involved with actually creating an image, and this is the whole reason why they feel so cinematic on completion. His surreal style is very different to most, and with his ability to create a crisis within each image makes him very unique indeed.

Crewdson usually creates a whole body of work, a selection of images around a certain theme, such as ‘Beneath the Roses’, and by doing this he has the opportunity to get his message across with a number of ideas or scenes, yet all closely tied with the general context.

Barbara Krueger

"I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are and who we aren't." (Wikipedia.2019)



Fig 9

Barbera Kruger is most famous for her Black and White Pictures that have bold messages (usually Red boxes with White Letters) overlaid on top to try and get a hard-hitting message across. She has created her unique own style and visually they are amazing, she really knows how the human brain works and what grabs people's attention, it's a very basic concept but I am sure she realises why her images attract so much attention.

As in the photo above, the actual photo is not a great one, but that is intended I'm sure, as not to distract ones eye from the message, her work is more about the feelings and thought created than the actual quality of the picture itself.

It is in complete contrast to Leibovitz and Crewdsons style as she spends little if any effort into the quality of the images she uses, and more often than not she uses images found on the internet.



Fig 10

I love the concept of the message and thought process obtained when looking at these pictures, as it comes from a different angle to most Photographers/Artists, and it was a major factor in my Animal Fur Skin work that I completed recently. I did attempt to recreate a similar piece of work in the same style, but in the whole I wasn't too impressed with it, but maybe I didn't put enough thought into the actual message?!



Fig 11

I obtained a load of old Fur Coat's as I buy and sell lots of things, however being a dog lover/owner I thought it would be a good idea to use them instead in a positive way and hopefully leave a little message in the head of anyone who sees my work, 'Stop cruelty to Animals, in any form'.



Fig 12

It is good to compare the work of practitioners as it clearly shows that there is no right or wrong way, and it is important to try and find a style of your own that you can concentrate on and develop.

When looking at all three of my chosen artists you can see that they are worlds apart in terms of style, yet they all have one thing in common, the strength of the works context is key to their popularity. I never used to understand how a stand-alone image could have so much to say, yet if you delve deep into the underlying message it starts to make itself clear.

Kruger and Leibovitz usually only have one image to get the message they intend across, as they may have been commissioned with this request, and Crewdson on the other hand usually creates a whole series of images, for an exhibition for instance, or a book.

It is a good comparison to see how these three artists/photographers have been able to embrace the use of technology to assist them with their predominant field of choice, photography. Without its use, they wouldn't be producing images in a style that they have chosen.

Opinions of the difference and benefits between Film and Digital photography have been discussed and argued since the 1990's, and there are strong cases for both, however these three artists have shown that using digital technology to assist isn't a bad thing, in my eyes, and that if it is used to get strong messages out to people via imagery, then it shouldn't be discredited.

“a lot of these early responses to the effects of digital technology on photography argued that it hailed the end of the medium”
(Bull 2010)

Whether or not technology in the future will get so far advanced that it does turn into a negative is yet to be seen and I can see it being detrimental as we enter the era of 'Fake News' and can see first-hand the adverse effect that is having on people's opinions, especially in the political arena. That said, I personally feel we are quite some way from that being the case, and I can't see it being the case, certainly not within my lifetime.

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