

When the Formula Knows the Audience:

Tropes and Conventions in Photojournalism

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The rhetorical power of photojournalism lies in the emotional response it inspires much more than the facts it attempts to represent. It cultivates an 'emotion economy' with visual tropes as its strongest currency. The function of the photograph as a document or emblem of proof is a folkloric myth. Believing is seeing, not the other way around.

As a documentary photographer, critically analyzing the state of contemporary documentary photography has been a driving force behind my work. Specifically, the development and prevalence of the industry's staple visual tropes, stereotypes and conventions. In an attempt to move beyond merely repeating the old mantra that photojournalism is in crisis, here I will discuss some of the developments that have informed my own artistic practice and reflect a growing concern regarding photography's creative and societal functions.

For my book *Margins of Excess*, I worked with actors in New York City and Los Angeles to make photographs that could be used as photojournalistic templates—creating a kind of 'stock photojournalism'—empty containers for the perfect trope.¹ The result



was a form of recycled iconography, employable in any context for any tragic event. The images borrow from established compositional formulas often found in the news media after devastating incidents, such as a school shooting or the aftermath of an explosion.

Performance #7 (New York), from the series *Margins of Excess*, by Max Pinckers, 2018. Courtesy of Max Pinckers.

These typically include close-ups of people embracing and portraits of bystanders crying, which are published *ad nauseam*. Images such as these are commonly made and published because they have the maximum emotional impact on the consumer, who can more comfortably identify with them than images of the actual event. By remaking these photographs with actors, they became professional mourners. The art historian Hans Theys compared their role and impact on the audience—weeping in our stead—to that of an ancient Greek chorus.²

Writing when World War II was at his doorstep, playwright Bertolt Brecht warned us about the conventionalization of realism and its modes of representation. “The norms of realism must keep responding to the changing conditions of the world,” he proclaimed in 1938, “and must never defer unthinkingly to received ideas about how the world is to be understood or represented.”³ Today, Brecht’s warning—a shot across the bows of society—seems more relevant than ever. During these times of ‘post-truth,’ ‘deep-fakes’ and ‘fake news,’ we seem to have lost a shared consensus about a ‘frame of realism’ on which we can all agree.

Every age has a method of reporting reality to the masses. In the Middle Ages it was painting. In the first decades of lens-based documentary it was staged photography and filmic reenactments. The twentieth century saw lightweight cameras, such as the Leica, give rise to a new ethos of authenticity—one that is still awkwardly maintained today. The recurring question these image-making media bring to light is not whether reality itself exists, but whether the audience agrees that what they are seeing is an honest

attempt to represent reality. Speaking to an audience of documentarians at Sheffield Doc/Fest in 2007, filmmaker Adam Curtis explained that:

Our so-called realism today is fundamentally born out of a political age, an age in which people believed that politics could not only understand the world, but could also change it. Documentaries were born out of that political ideal. This agreed frame of realism in today’s world has deteriorated to the extent that there is no general consensus about what is real, what is fiction, half-truth, or opinion.⁴

In such an era of uncertainty and overwhelming amounts of information, people no longer trust finger-wagging, expository documentary forms that supposedly present them with facts. When surrounded by the ideology of hyper-individualism, today the only reality that people seem to trust is their own inner feelings.

Although the so-called ‘iconomy’ of crisis photography is undergoing a crisis itself, it nonetheless maintains its position of authority and remains a strong currency in today’s visual economy. As a reaction to a new and disruptive online visual culture, traditional media seems to be holding on to simplistic, conservative narrative formats that are easily digestible. Amidst uncertainty and confusion, the real underlying concern rests in the power structures upholding conventional ‘world-views’ in the form of outdated visual clichés. Caught up in the predominant ideology of neoliberal market capitalism, photojournalism strives for an efficient, perfected and normalized



format based on the established status quo. Images produced by photojournalists are visual currency in an attention economy that thrives on emotionally charged, singular, powerful and arresting photos that seize the consumer’s attention. These images live in

Performance #3 (Los Angeles), from the series *Margins of Excess*, by Max Pinckers, 2018. Courtesy of Max Pinckers.

an environment dependent on advertising for their survival—with eyeballs and mouse clicks equating to dollar signs and price charts.

Photojournalism and advertising have never been far apart. In the 1960s and 1970s, the use of color photography on assignments was increasingly compulsory for some magazines. This was due to magazine advertisements being in color, pressurizing editorial work to follow suit.⁵ Advertising, and thus color reportage, influenced some pioneering color photographers to such an extent that they began to adorn their subjects in red T-shirts, caps and scarves while on assignment. The reason for this was that red is the color that ‘pops’ best on Kodachrome film, the most widely used color film from the mid 1930s to the late 1990s.

Unlike photojournalism, when we are confronted with advertising we usually know we are being sold something. The codes of advertising are no secret—its subversive seduction still effective regardless—models gazing directly back at us, broad glowing smiles,

subliminal phallic symbols, wristwatches set at ten past ten, and so on. Consumer engagement functions in a very similar way when it comes to photojournalism, yet its value lies in eliciting an emotional response beyond that of desire.

Just as many of today’s commodities are deprived of their substance—coffee without caffeine, alcohol-free beer, butter without fat—with only a simulation remaining, documentary photography, and especially its cousin photojournalism, seem to have become dominated by easily recognizable ‘templates.’ They cast the world in the same mold over and over again and, instead of being avoided, are celebrated and awarded. You know them, perhaps unconsciously or by some kind of deeply engrained affinity. Pietà figures, and toys or shoes amongst the rubble, for example, bodies emerging from the smoke, wailing women, faces half submerged in water, eyebrows peaking over the bottom of the frame, dazed soldiers, black silhouettes against brightly lit landscapes, hands displaying objects of interest, kids jumping in the

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Rwandan refugees, Benaco, Tanzania, by Eli Reed, 1995. Courtesy of © Eli Reed / Magnum Photos.



Photograph of *Trophy Camera v0.9*, Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers, 2017. Permanent collection, FOMU Antwerp, Belgium. Courtesy of Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers.

water, a bomb's distant smoke cloud rising above a city, close-ups of emotionally distressed people, shots through car windows or other 'frames within the frame.' The list goes on. Here, the importance of conformist esthetics precedes the claim of the subjects depicted in them. The real danger in this is when photographic conventions become self-referential instead of self-reflexive; when visual tropes are arbitrarily applied to any subject in any given situation, simply because of their effective visual rhetoric.

The dangers of passively conforming to such esthetic conventions and formulaic choices of subject matter were the inspiration behind *Trophy Camera v0.9*, a collaborative project with media artist Dries Depoorter. The fully functioning camera, with no viewfinder or screen, is programmed to recognize, take and save only award-winning photos. It contains a computer which runs on an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm, trained on contest-winning images from 1955 to 2017.⁶ Using computer vision software, the AI camera instantly judges the photos it takes, comparing them to a dataset comprising hundreds of assigned labels. The most recurring (and thus highest rated) tags being 'people,' 'war' and 'military.' When a photograph is taken, the camera attributes a correlation value to the newly produced image, giving it a percentage score based on the chance it has to win the award. If the score is above 90 percent, the camera automatically uploads the image to the dedicated website (trophy.camera), but anything less is instantly deleted.

The documentary filmmaker Errol Morris claimed, "it is often said that seeing is believing. But we do not form our beliefs on the basis of what we see; rather,

what we see is often determined by our beliefs."⁷ Studies have shown that communication in many instances does not have an informative function but a ritualistic one.⁸ Consumers of news media search for information that reconfirms their worldview as reconstructions of a world they can identify with and that tells them something about who they already are. This is where photojournalism truly thrives. Not in revealing the complexity of a given problem, but by provoking an emotional response based on powerful visual cues prescribed by a success formula.

The specter of Jesus Christ, for example, is not uncommon in news imagery. His figure resurrects throughout photography's history as one of grief, empathy and guilt. The Hellenistic pathos formula—heroic victimhood—forms a central theme throughout Western art history. The crucifixion and the Virgin Mary with child are the most common icons, expressing

the intimate relationship between victimhood and the rhetorical power of the image. A trope in photojournalism that essentially fits into a "long and convenient tradition of coupling human suffering and God's will," was pointed out by art critic Ingrid Sischy, without accusation for the grounds of this suffering and as something that cannot be cured.⁹ Replicating such poses have proven to be some of the most effective for achieving successful *Trophy Camera* photos, which also reiterate the predominantly western, Judeo-Christian framing of photojournalism's 'world view.'

The process of lamenting the dead is the most recurring motif amongst World Press Photo awards, with the first prize winners of 1964, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2003, 2005 and 2013 all depicting the familiar scene of people wailing, weeping and crying over the dead. Writer and photographer Wilco Versteeg has argued that:

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Nogovac, Kosovo, Yugoslavia 28 January 1990, by Georges Méryllon. Family and neighbors mourn the death of Nasimi Elshani, killed during a protest against the Yugoslavian government's decision to abolish the autonomy of Kosovo. Courtesy of Georges MERILLON / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

[even an] increased knowledge of these codes, steeped, if one likes, in colonial gazes, has done little to change them, and they've thus remained shockingly consistent since, at least, the 1970s: dead Westerners aren't shown; dead Arab men make up a large proportion of our daily war diet; Africans are very often shown in groups and never as individuals; white people are most often portrayed as calm and composed, even when shown as victims of terror.¹⁰

Reflecting on their experience as World Press Photo jury members, artist duo Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin ask:

Do we even need to be producing these images any more? Do we need to be looking at them? We have enough of an image archive within our heads to be able to conjure up a representation of any manner of pleasure or horror. Does the photographic image even have a role to play any more?¹¹

So, where do we go from here? What kinds of images are still needed and how can engaging with them contribute to a more nuanced and impactful understanding of the world?

As twentieth century postmodernist criticism of photography has long established, feelings of empathy, grief, guilt and isolation ultimately relieve us as viewers from the burden of complicity when looking at photographs of crisis. They are assumed to be redemptive, not for the person in the image, but for the viewer. Martha Rosler famously dismissed

traditional photojournalism as the “vener of social concern.”¹² But when it comes to repetitive visual templates, this idea is expanded further. It is no longer about triggering a genuine reaction of empathy but, like the tropes themselves, it is now merely about generating an automated and coded response. Is this not an ‘illusion of empathy’ rather than an authentic sense of compassion, even if only directed at oneself? Like canned laughter on a sitcom, doesn't a set of embedded signals or visual cues in a photograph simply elicit a response without the need to expend any real effort? The essence, or content, of what is supposed to create engagement with viewers intellectually and emotionally, is bypassed. Photojournalistic templates create a response because the audience is hard-wired to react in a certain way—not because the audience knows the formula, but because the formula knows the audience. Why? Because this is far easier, less challenging and more emotionally economical. What if photojournalism was to eventually become entirely formulaic? A set of empty codes that elicit empty, automated responses. Would this not only be a total disregard for genuine political struggles, but also create an artistic vacuum—in a desert of visual redundancy—populated by an indifferent, apathetic audience?

By repeating the same photographs, we are doomed to repeat the same problems. In a response to Jonathan Bachman's 2016 photograph of a Black Lives Matter protest echoing Marc Riboud's iconic anti-war image, photography critic Brad Feuerhelm writes that:

we are pilfering images of iconography-images that transcend a singular experience into mass



understanding, but we are doing so with a zombie prescription that doles out its numbing elixir in repetition. With this repetition comes the sincere weight of repeating the past by welcoming ourselves into the fold of the ineffective.¹³

Repetition, familiarity and the idea of the 'sequel' is dangerously at work here. We are sadly all too familiar with and readily waiting for the next similar event to occur—one that will be accepted and digested just as easily as the previous. "Proxy images and proxy sequels" such as these, justly concludes Feuerhelm, "are destroying our way of interpreting and understanding real first-hand struggle. They are beating us into submission and worse, we are hailing them as prize-

Opposite top: In Marc Riboud's famous photograph taken in Washington, D.C., Jan Rose Kasmir confronts the American National Guard outside the Pentagon during the 1967 anti-Vietnam march, which helped turn USA public opinion against the war in Vietnam. Courtesy of © Marc Riboud/Fonds Marc Riboud au MNAAG / Magnum Photos.



Opposite, bottom left: *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*, by Jonathan Bachman, 2016. Ilesha Evans stands her ground at a rally contesting police violence against black men outside the Baton Rouge Police Department in Louisiana, USA, on July 9. She had traveled there to protest the death of Alton Sterling, who was shot at close range while being held to the ground by two white police officers on July 5. Courtesy of Jonathan Bachman / Reuters.



Opposite, bottom right: *San Jose George Floyd Protests* by Dai Sugano, *The Mercury News*, 2020. A protester takes a knee in front of San Jose Police officers during a protest in California on May 29, following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Courtesy of Dai Sugano / MediaNews Group / *The Mercury News* via Getty Images.

worthy."¹⁴ Four years later, another proxy image to another proxy sequel went viral on social media and bounced around the news echo chamber, that of *The Mercury News* photojournalist Dai Sugano, who photographed a young black woman peacefully confronting riot police during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

Documentary photography itself is stuck in conventions, trapped in a construct that it cannot tear away from because it always *frames* something within a form of realism that is constricted and ideologically defined. Through my work, I attempt to undermine documentary's authoritative state and its claim to knowledge and truth. By challenging our preconceptions and questioning the mechanisms that define what can and should be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done, I embrace documentary's blind spots and imagine a world beyond the boundaries of the frame.¹⁵ If photography is to play a truly influential role in society—and bring about actionable change—does it not have to question its freedom? Does photography have the capability of articulating its very un-freedom? Instead of obsessively policing its moral, ethical and creative rules and regulations in order to maintain its objectivity and integrity, the documentary photography industry should rather look at how it is continually repeating history as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In order to break this mold, it should be more critical of its own limitations by embracing today's complexity, uncertainty and messiness. ■

NOTES

- 1 See Pinckers.
- 2 Theys.
- 3 Brecht.
- 4 Curtis.
- 5 Jones Griffiths, 40.
- 6 The reference images used were winners from the Single Image category of the annual World Press Photo Contest.
- 7 Morris, 93.
- 8 Decreus.
- 9 Sischy, 92.
- 10 Versteeg.
- 11 Broomberg & Chanarin.
- 12 Rosler, 306.
- 13 Feuerhelm.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 van Dienderen et al.

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