

# Study of Documentary Photography in the Postmodern World

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## Abstract

*Documentary photography is a showing of the real world that looks around by curiously photography. Documentary photo carries worldview of photographer to exempt it from the picture of nature, a portrait and a street landscape. Also, recorder of an event or character or a feeling represents aspects more than what is shown at first glance in addition to concept and impels the audience to view the world with a new perspective. This research attempted to obtain remarkable notes on the structure of documentary photography in the postmodern world by its introduction and emphasis on the visual values and to enumerate its features and visual concepts with examples of documentary photos in order to analyze and evaluate it. The research method used in this paper was analytical-descriptive based on library resources. In addition, the study has also made it possible to obtain visual differences and similarities. The purpose of this article was in fact to study and identify the elements, meanings and concepts that photographer artists have represented in their photographic images.*

**Keywords:** Documentary, Photography, Postmodern, Visual.

## Introduction

Every work of art is the child of its time and is the generator of our feelings in many cases; as a result, any cultural era creates its own art that is unrepeatable. Trying to revive the art of the past produces a dead art in the best form (Kandinsky, 2000). The invention of camera was as a revolution for visual arts that changed the position and relationship of artist with his community as a whole. Photography has been acclaimed totally even in its most basic form due to the details and facts. Arthur Goldsmith believed that we are living in an era that the photographic image overcomes it. Today, photographic image has permeated in the cache of the human mind and his emotions with power. This power is such that can be compared with the power of

Atomic Energy in the history and contemporary events (Dandys, 2006). Today's media can be seriously considered as natural means for artistic expression. Life is represented like as a mirror in this media. New visual media are not only for the viewers as a miracle, but also for those who want to explain their thoughts, it is miraculous. In the never-ending evolution of new techniques, photo and video cameras are continually becoming simple and number of their users are rising. But technical expertise and skill alone is not enough. Properties and characteristics of these devices require the visual components to be better understood. In the age of technology, the meaning of art has changed much, but many aesthetic concepts in art have remained in the form of past yet. Characteristics of visual arts and the way its relationship with the community has surprisingly changed, but there have not be needed changes in the aesthetic concepts. Visual arts can only be received through subjective intuition, but in truth, expressing with the image or visual expression is a very complex product of human intelligence that we unfortunately still have very little understanding of it (Dandys, 2006).

### **Postmodernists**

There was a time when academics have shied away from using the term postmodernism, but today, this term has shown its efficacy in trends test in art, philosophy and architecture, cinema, dance and music. In recent years, psychology, religious sciences, history, science and technology have not been yet apart of postmodernist thought. The fact is that postmodernism not only has penetrated in artistic and intellectual debate, but also has affected all aspects of life, politics, economics, religion and ethics, communications and mass media, and even the "structure of feeling" and human relationships with each other (Gharebaghi, 2001). Today's, some people know postmodernism as sequence and series of the pure world of modernism that art and its excellent concept has been removed from this domain. But of course when speaking of art, postmodernism is so much more than a mechanical sequence that have shown emotions and tendencies of modernism as stranger. The main issues of concern in this ideology are human rights, supporting political oppositions, anti-racism, anti-nuclear weapons movement and environmental maintenance movement. A generation that believes this has reached to the success, and has the whole things, proposes solidarity with love and peace, does not have class misfortune and the sign of capital curse (Farhadpour, 1994). In fact, postmodernism has re-arranged all images and photography concepts and allows the photographer to experiment with the media and any use of all the facilities and its possibilities. Modernism had clear boundaries between high art and low art, but these boundaries disappeared in concept of postmodernism, and mass culture replaced by both high and low arts and cultures.

### **Photography in the postmodern world**

Postmodern photography, like other events in this era, has close relationship with issues discussed and circumstances dominated on contemporary societies. The new language that got common in the art in the years following the 1970s led to a fundamental review of the earlier works. In this new era that has always been linked with the name of postmodernism, there is an inextricable connection with the influencing media such as television and the Internet. Postmodernism has not been accompanied by a general sense agreement and it only be used in a negative sense in most cases; and wherever it is used in a positive sense, it is used as a pandemic concept (Douglas Crimp, 1993). Postmodernism in the contemporary period has a significant impact on documentary photography. It can be said the best way to understand the concept of postmodern in art is the use of photographs and photography. Terms of people's moods and feelings have found far higher importance than the social and objective reality and the axis of the work is the feelings and experiences of the photographer and his view to the surroundings. Such photos require more accurate and more detailed interpretation that each viewer should think about them to understand the message concerned.

The linkage between postmodernism and photography stems from where the artists tried by all means to prove that the fact should not only be placed in front of the camera. Photography in this period is self-consciously and has pictorial aspects of the form. "Artists such as Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine have copied images and pasted in the form of photos. Richard Prince created his collections by photographing again from the photos that were published in magazines and posters in the 1970s (Figure \*). This new approach led to controversy both in the field of art and legal equivalents. In 1977 when Prince re-photographed the four printed images published in the New York Times magazine, it has been risen difficult discussions about the role of author and rights of the owner in the art world. Legitimizing the disputes caused the use of image Copyright Act in photography" (Etehad, 2008).



**Figure 1. The collection of "cowboys", photographer: Richard Prince.**

From other artists, "Barbara Kruger, artistic director of the women's magazine, cut or magnified pieces of photos with fundamental concepts using montage techniques. The photos have been covered with aggressive expression toward depression, hypocrisy and power structure that men have. Kruger had a profound influence on art and feminist theory. Through her work in public environments such as billboards, t-shirts and books and using the acquaintance and the familiar style, she assured convenient access to the work and increased their impact as a social commentator and a political troublemaker" (Tandis journal, 2005).

Especially in the last two decades, many works were created with such tendencies. The works that transformed into persistent works of art only due to being photo. Collection of "The Brown Sisters" by Nicholas Nixon included pictures of photographer's wife with his three sisters which was recorded two decades ago. Nixon has added an image to the collection each year and has repeated a particular way on the position of standing of four sisters in all images. Although the images discussed was only considered at the level of family photos in the early years, after nearly twenty years, a larger collection was created that was associated with the abstract concept of time. Collection of "The Brown Sisters" was began at a time when photography studies experienced new strains and tested the new structures to the modern era.

This case was seen much especially in the 1990s that each one was somehow under influence of the media or showed sharp reactions towards it. Totally, strong institutions such as television and the Internet established their impacts and consolidated their position more than what museums, galleries or magazines could affect (Etehad, 2008).



**Figure 2. Collection of "The Brown Sisters", photographer: Nicholas Nixon.**

Modern art is placed in the communication position since provided to the audience in any case. In fact, it can be said that no aesthetic experience can escape from this position (Habermas, 1988). Modernism got a particular importance to the great masters and distinguished the boundary and dividing line between pure photography as fine art photography and public photography and what ordinary people were doing. But the postmodern photography had an approach to be in contrast with modern photography features that were myths. Its goal was to say that each photo can have its word and concept. With such an approach, there is no the final, correct and complete reading of the work of art and reading doesn't mean consuming, but on the contrary means the production. For this reason, the image reading was strengthened and became important. In the encountering of the artwork with the audience, a common element must be that makes communication possible and this element is language (Ahmadi, 2010)

### **Documentary photography in the postmodern world**

Documentary photography is loyal to the incident and event that happen in facing camera and the photographer records it and can be informative and influential in the lives and minds of humanity. These pictures can make positive changes in the society. Documentary photography is a creative phenomenon through which it can be entered into the mind and imagination of the artist. There is no universal definition on this important and complex part of photography that includes all its aspects, any non-manipulated photo can be called documentary photograph. Today's photographers are under tremendous pressure of society formed by real and objective imaging on the one hand and on the other hand, they tend to represent infrimage criticism by photography means in accordance with the performance of postmodernism. In this case, photography did not get as an abject and low-level quote and representation of reality and the world, but it became a prominent and active role for the creation of meaning in the world and the new reality. In fact, the growth and expression of the photography art in this society is in the direction of abstract tendency of the post-modern's artists in making the world a stunning image and object. When the world turned out to be an image, a stunning fictional reality is most common, as the contemporary mentality has planned and plans its egocentric desires and imagery based on configuration of such a fact.

"In the meantime, the postmodernism guides photographer artists such as David Laundy to transform concepts and meanings in fantastic photos. Photos by David Laundy were of small dolls and sculptures (Figure \*). His photographs were far away the concept and purpose of expression artist's creation in photo that was landscape of art in modernism. His photos disappeared the borders between high and low arts. In

1972, he created a series of photos that has continued with a distinct pattern until today. The restructured virtual and documenting reality of the works is their central motif. "Modern Romance" deals with bewildered women of our era which are placed in gloomy corners of apartments or semi-lit cafes. Artist used video camera to achieve color shades television images; so that, it photographed the replica and its layout at first and then photographed the TV screen" (Tandis journal, 2005).



**Figure 3. Collection of “The Wild West”, by David Levinthal (1987-1989)**

Maybe a few years ago, it could not be imagined such a possibility for documentary photography, but now it can. World Press Photo 2009 highlighted evidence of this claim. Photographer of the collection was Li JieJan. His images feature was in the case that has rebuilt the famous war photographs images using a variety of dolls and re-photographed. This collection created a dual position by considering its proportion with documentary pictures on one hand and with regard to the representation of dolls that related to the process coordinated in documentary photography. The flow that prefers simulation to reality.



**Figure 4. Robert Capa's famous photo that a soldier is falling and was taken in the Spanish Civil War in 1936**





**Figure 5. The photo collection of "war famous photos are seen again" by Li Jiejan (2009)**



**Figure 6. Pick up the flag at Iwo Jima, by Joe Rosenthal**

Some photographic artists raised the preparation of successive images as a serious way of aesthetic expression from the 1960s. Their most famous one was Duane Michals who expressed an event within the allotted time in his work. Consecutive photos allowed him to direct visual and narrative impacts that apply on the viewers in accordance with his demands and increased the effectiveness of his photos on the viewer. From the perspective of Michals, photography is primarily a tool for identification.



**Figure 7. Photo collection of "Grandpa goes to heaven" by Duane Michals (1989)**

### **Renovated documentary photography**

In renovated documentary photography, the photographer trim theme of his choice and record it at the desired moment. For the most famous photographers of this style, it can be noted to Jeff Wall who influenced on contemporary thought of photography art in the 1980s and 1990s. Jeff Wall was a storyteller. He told stories about people of our age that are urban or rural, and posed photos of their daily or unreasonable life. In practice, what he was trying to expand in his work was an amalgam of the historical structure of experience and today's community. People who were depicted, sometimes were as actors and sometimes only as a model in a figure. He said that: "It's like anything that is in your mind, and you do not know it already existed there, but when immediately faced it with the direct experience, you know it" (Wall and Chevrier, 2000). Everything was in its place and were playing a role that was assigned to it in his photos. No element fit randomly in the text of the picture. Title of works were often simple and very expressive and had an important role in encountering of the audience with the works. Unlike theories that knew photography as a decremented art, renovated documentary photography is the incremented art.

Photographer can lower and enhance or create whatever he wants within the box. In documentary photography, the photographer should decide under a seconds and choose frames of his choice and button the shutter, but in renovated documentary photography, the photographer has enough time to think and lighting and arrangement of the scene and the importance of time is reduced. Generally, this type of photography is associated with text. This means that photographer tries to bring part of his thinking in the describing text.

### **Conclusion**

Expansion of photography as a rival to other arts is concerned as a major challenge for artists. With visual and technical capabilities that photography has in its essence, it endured many arts in the postmodernism period and has become as the main tool in other arts. But the nature of photographs and photography is something else and that's citation aspect of it. Apart from two-dimensional images, photo can convey further ideas, the landscape was a reality in front of the camera, but photography was able to induce another reality from the same landscape; as the much deeper and perhaps more important reality, if the first feature of documentary photography is to transfer part of the reality of surrounding environment, the second feature is the ability to provide analysis and viewpoints of photographers on that reality. In this period of art, it had impact on documentary photography due to its comprehension. This effect is quite tangible in photos of the pioneer photographers in documentary photography. Due to the relentless onslaught of imagery (digital photography) to the photography circle or simple images created by computer and its growing impact on individuals, it can be said that photography as already known is fading in halo of past dust. That's why documentary photographers seek new ways of visual expression that in the meantime, the importance of thinking is shown more than ever before. In short, the future of documentary photography is for those who are independent-minded apart from recognizing the authenticity of image that requires research in various fields including art history. Photography can be dominant art of the present century. The change that postmodernism has brought in photography has caused a critical portion of postmodernism aesthetics in contemporary art to be depended on photography and it opens new ways for documentary photography.

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