Photojournalism And Its Place In Social Progression

Photojournalism is a practice that has been used for decades to visualise news stories, replacing old-fashioned illustrations and woodblock engraving. While it is closely intertwined with other photography types, like documentary, street, or social commentary,like those popularised by Thomas Bewick at the end of the 18th century photojournalism is distinguished by complying with a stringent ethical system that requires honesty and impartiality whilst depicting a story purely on journalistic terms. The National Press Photographers Association emphasises these demands; “it is the individual responsibility of every photojournalist at all times to strive for pictures that report truthfully, honestly and objectively”. 1 In addition to this, while photojournalism is typically used in the short term for informative purposes in newspapers and magazines, their impact can drastically influence society and be used to aid social progression. For example, Dorothea Lange’s photograph ‘Migrant Mother’ during the Great Depression brought mass attention to the Midwest, prompting the government to distribute food to migrant camps in order to relieve starvation.

In this essay I will explore other examples of photojournalism, and its close counterparts, and the lasting influence of the practice in ultimately aiding further social progression through the 20th and 21st century.

The emergence of photojournalism provided new prospects for photographers in that travelling across the word in order to document subjects was possible because cameras became portable and more compact as technology progressed. A significant benefit of photojournalism was the ability to capture the most disadvantaged in society in order to highlight the privilege that us, the consumers, hold, and thus fight for social change. It was the first medium to convey social issues to a large audience, through magazines and newspapers. A popular topic within the genre is the consequences of war, capturing heart-wrenching scenes of those affected by it.

Eugene Smith has been described as “the single most important American photographer in the development of the editorial photo essay.” His most influential works were those of significant world and political events, such as World War Two and his coverage of Clement Attlee’s election in 1945. Afterwards, he laid the foundations of modern photojournalism by photographing from a humanist perspective; “[they were] characterised by a strong sense of empathy and social conscience.”

During the Second World War, Smith photographed events in the Battle for Saipan. Among his photo essays of this time were some of the most influential photos of his career, but I find that his most poignant creation is a photograph of an American Marine holding a nearly lifeless infant from a cave where native islanders had been hiding. Smith’s compassion is shown clearly in the composition of this photo in addition to the content of it. He hides the identity of the marine, which highlights the anonymity, and perhaps loneliness, of those fighting on the front line, which is particularly powerful in this image as while they were entrapped in a violent situation the compassion and ‘human side’ is still very prevalent. This image was important in social progression because it undermines the standard preconceptions of war, especially overseas, and it highlights the armed forces’ heroism.

Another instance of Smith’s photojournalistic influence on social progression comes in the form of his 1951 essay ‘Spanish Village’. He travelled to a small community in Western Spain that was heavily stricken by poverty, and stayed for one month, capturing the everyday struggles and grievances of those living in rural destitution. This came as a result of his new humanistic approach to photojournalism and ultimately laid the basis for journalism today.

Smith held the same style of photography throughout his career - black and white film, high contrast, and solemn portraiture. It's these qualities that I find convey his intention of illuminating the realities faced by the lowest socioeconomic classes incredibly well, and in turn creates photographs reminiscent of the dramatic paintings of Caravaggio. He epitomised the term “concerned photographer”, yet working with Life magazine, which then focussed a lot on the ‘American Dream’ contradicted that practise. However, this meant that he changed the way that documentary photography was perceived by its consumers and allowed them to become more aware of global issues, thus becoming fundamental in social progression.

The impact of Smith’s work can be compared to that of Dorothea Lange. Her social commentary in the 1930s paved the way for government action in the height of the Great Depression and illustrated that the ‘American Dream’ wasn’t a viable option for those living in deprived areas as a result of the Depression, humanising the consequences of it.

‘Migrant Mother’ is perhaps Lange’s most paramount photograph from her career. I find this piece to be highly emotional - it shows the strength of a mother in that difficult period, although the only expression there is of grievance and exhaustion. This is emphasised in that her face is the focal point in the photograph, which personifies the feeling of her community. Her children cowering behind her show their dependency on her, which is common in that stage of their life but in these circumstances they need her and her resilience more than ever.

Lange’s work sparked mass attention and criticism of the government for essentially gaslighting the poorest in society. This resulted in a multi-million dollar food package sent to migrant camps to provide some relief for the substantial hardships faced by those in need. In addition, it prompted global sympathy towards those worst off.