Social-documentary Photography And The Issue Of Privacy

All photographers have an agenda when set or start a project. A reason for doing something. Some photographers will do anything to achieve their agenda by invading people personal spaces and privacy. This started happening more when the first-hand help camera also known as the point and shoot camera was invented and started to become widely available to new and up-coming photographers. The invention of this style of camera was heavily criticised by professional photographers. History books rarely mentioned this however the writers may have mentioned that “the hand camera was scorned by most serious photographers.” (Jay, 1984, p. 8) However, they never mention that is was “almost universally criticised by every intelligent non-photographer’s as a major social nuisance.” (Jay, 1984, p. 8) This was because it made it easier for photographers to approach their own agendas which majority led them to invading people privacy and pointing camera’s in the publics faces. This also started to give photographers a bad connotation of being aggressive and this was backed up by some photographers approaches towards their own agenda.

Susan Sontag wrote that “to photography people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.” (Sontag, 1971, p. 14) Some people didn’t agree with what some photojournalists were doing however with their agendas and deadlines looming over them can sometimes “pressure the photographer into making snap judgements” (Kobre, 1991, p. 292) Some photographers have to make this decision to get to their end point, to reach their agenda which may also be against their morals to do this however they make the decision that it may be worth it to reach their agenda.

Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis and Roy Stryker; who was the director of the FSA however wasn’t a photographer all approached their agendas differently however all attempted to “move men’s minds in pursuit of a cause by appealing to their social conscience.” (Doherty, 1976, p. 10) This may have been the public or even congress and the government they were trying to persuade. There are links between these three individuals which form a bond between them as they each respected the work of the last however they were too much individualistic to suggest any continuity between them from the first one to the last one. All these three men were “clearly involved in the concept of propaganda in its most sophisticated form” (Doherty, 1976, p. 11) All three were trying to “persuade and communicate a group of people to action; to believe in their course and to take some action to correct what they believed was a social injustice” (Doherty, 1976, p. 11)

The Farming Security Administration or the FSA was set up in 1937 to help explain to the public and congress what the programs it was running were trying to accomplices and what they were trying to solve. The FSA decided to employ a group of photographers; one of these photographers being well known for her image ‘Migrant Mother’ was Dorothea Lange, to document America the areas of lower class poverty and why the agency excised in the first place to solve. The image of the ‘Migrant Mother’ became an icon and a symbol for the work the FSA did during this time.

This image of the ‘Migrant Mother’ was “subject to much controversy within the FSA.”

(Doherty, 1976, p. 80) It even raised concern by Roy Stryker; who at the time was one of the directors of the Farming Security Administration, as he was concerned by the “unadorned truth” (Doherty, 1976, p. 80) behind the image. This was due to Dorothea Lange’s decision to manipulate the image to remove a thumb in the image’s lower right hand corner. She made this decision due to her feeling “concerned with a deep sense of aesthetic” (Doherty, 1976, p. 80) which she only decided to do after the first version of the image had been published.

Roy Stryker carefully guarded any chance of criticism with this image due to how much the image achieved for the Farming Security Administration. And other time he has “mellowed his feeling about the thumb.” (Doherty, 1976, p. 80) This image still receives criticism from photographers who study the photograph and Dorothea Lange today as they argue the fact that the image looks unnatural and setup to some people. It adds to this point when people find out that the ‘Migrant Mother’ image that we all recognise is “one of several taken of the same subject” (Doherty, 1976, p. 80). And the image next to this work is almost unknown by people. When people find out about this adds to the speculation that Dorothea Lange approached her agenda for the Farming Security Administration by setting up this image in several different ways to attempt to get the best outcome by physically manipulating the image by placing the mother and the kids in the photo where she wanted them. By knowing this; it takes away from the strong message and emotion behind the image.

Some people would back the decisions Dorothea Lange made during the creation of this image as it is said that “photojournalist face decisions of morality” (Kobre, 1991, p. 292) which may include “removing a distracting item from a photography.” (Kobre, 1991, p. 292) Someone can make the argument that this is exactly what Dorothea Lange decided to do when it came to making the decision to setup up the mother and children when shooting the ‘Migrant Mother’ photograph or when Lange decided to make the decision to remove the thumb from the ‘Migrant Mother’ Image. They could also argue the fact that Dorothea Lange would have felt pressure from the Farming Security Administration to make the decisions to do these thing for her to make a snap judgement about these decisions at the time due to wanting to create a very effective image and for not being happy with things in the image that may distract you from the main subject of the image. Photographers are sometimes pressured to make “snap judgements even the most delicate situations.” (Kobre, 1991, p. 292) However, it can also be argued that was it worth it to remove the thumb from the image manipulating the image to something that it wasn’t at the time. Or was it worth it to photograph the same subject several time; setting up the subject to get the perfect photograph when Lange could have turned up photographed them as they were at the time and move on and come out with a more natural looking photograph which hadn’t been setup or manipulated but may not have had the same effect as the image did that she had created.

Jacob Riis documented the lower class of the Lower East Side of New York and their living conditions in the hope to bring their lives to the attention of others to document and show the horrible living conditions they had no choice but to live in. “To accomplish his goal, he had to expose, in its most vivid form, the life he sought to alter.” (Doherty, 1976, p. 12) The reason he wanted to do this was due to his exposure to this side of New York during his early career as a journalist “led him to compassionate avocation as a social reformer. So dedicated was his effort.” (Doherty, 1976, p. 11) However, some may argue the fact that the effort he put in was never asked for by the people living in the lower east side of New York. As in the process of him managing to get the governments attention of the living conditions of the people there. His photographic work of the living condition overpowered his photographs of the community which

was there as well. A photographer who documented the Lower East Side of New York at the same time as Jacob Riis who was Alice Austen concentrated more on documenting the community that they had built. The Argument could have been made if Jacob Riis' photos of the living conditions hadn't overpowered his other work of the lower east side or if the government had also seen Alice Austen's photos of the lower east side that did these people want to be rehomes as in the process of being rehomed they also managed to destroy a community that they probably struggled to build from having nothing. Another argument can be made that the people most likely saw Jacob Riis as aggressive and intrusive as he would just walk into people living areas and start taking pictures of people without consent. Did Jacob Riis' agenda to try and give these people living in the lower east side of New York during this time over shadow his morals to respect the people he was photographing and could he have approached his agenda in a less aggressive way.

Lewis Hine published an article in the photographic times on using photography in schools and backed the use of cameras as a learning tool within schools. "It was clear Hine's writing that the aesthetic values were of the highest level of concern" (Doherty, 1976, p. 13) when it came to his approach to his agenda. "This one point of emphasis is the element that made him different from Riis as an individual and the FSA as a project." (Doherty, 1976, p. 13)

Lewis Hine was most famous for documenting and interviewing children working in factories, mines, etc. Lewis Hine found photography to support his cause and travelled the country documenting the conditions children were meant to work in. He once said "There is work that profits children, and there is work that bring profit only to the employer. The object of employing children is not to train them, but to get high profits from their work." (Mussio, 2016) He would travel the country documenting these work places and interviewing the children in secret with a pad and pen hidden in his pocket and as he was a school teacher at the time while doing this he got on with the children quickly and gained their trust to confide in him and tell him things. His approach so far to this agenda was very secretive in some ways to try and not get caught by the employers however was very effective as it showed off exactly what he was trying to make the government aware of. He made so much effect he quit his job in 1908 to work as an investigative photographer for the National Children Labour Committee or NCLC for short.

Lewis Hine was a school teacher who came to New York in 1901. As early as 1908 he published an article in The Photographic Times on photography in schools. He backed the use of cameras as a learning tool within schools. "it was clear in Hine's writing that the aesthetic values were of the highest level of concern." (Jay, 1984, p. 13) The single body of work that Hine created reflected his "commitment to high aesthetic standards because he was an artist." (Doherty, 1976, p. 13)

This made Lewis Hine clearly different to Jacob Riis as an individual and the FSA as a project and group of photographers. Although Dorothea Lange and other photographers who were part of the FSA were "committed to the highest level of aesthetic consideration in their work for the FSA." (Doherty, 1976, p. 13)

The way photographers approach their agenda for a project can really affect other people not just themselves but for Jacobs Riis' case it also affected community even thought he had good intentions to better the lives of people who have less than himself however Riis ultimately destroyed a whole community in the process and you may question was it worth rehoming all these people for better living condition when in the process he was destroying a community they

had built between them by invading what they would have classed as their homes and convinced the government to rehome all these people without seeing the other side of the agreement which could have been made by viewing Alice Austen’s work photographing the markets in the Lower East side of New York. And they probably didn’t ever ask the people within the community they were rehoming whether they wanted to move or how they felt about the whole situation.

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