SPE talk notes

**Myth, Montage and Magic Realism: Rethinking the photograph as a discursive document.**

Acknowledging the photograph's ontological ambiguity, I will examine a possible social agency for the photograph within an art discourse, which seeks creates space for political mobilization. Using Jacques Rancière’s theoretical development of an *a priori* logic of an equality of intelligence (2009), I will examine how an assumed equality, applied across various forms of photography can provide a more productive framework to consider how images are used and reused. It will be argued that by assuming this *a priori* logic, we can move the debate beyond questions that are concerned with the originality of an image or its status as document and allows for a reconsideration of its use as a catalyst for debate.

To begin with I would like to provide a personal, anecdotal story of an encounter with photographic artworks that has proven to be fundamental to my continued engagement with photography. I am originally from Northern Ireland and I grew up in what some might consider, a rough area of West Belfast during the nineteen seventies and eighties. The civil rights movement that began in the late 1960s had been over taken by an increasingly organised guerrilla war campaign by Irish Republicans amidst the backdrop of a vicious sectarian conflict, becoming the most violent periods of what is colloquially known as ‘The Troubles.’ As the small devolved state descended into violent chaos the spectacular newsworthiness of the bombings and shootings has meant that this period was predominantly represented and understood through photojournalism.

Photojournalism has always been framed by a discourse that presents the photographer as an honest, professional eyewitness and the images produced as reliable visual records of newsworthy events. However these images are then set to work to bolster a clear narrative of the events described, a narrative that contained all the political and ideological assumptions of the media institutions. Within the context of a predominantly British press, it was clear that their narration of the origins and rationale for the political violence in Northern Ireland did not accord with the everyday experience of many of those who lived there.

Even as a child I felt the keen sense of communal frustration, of not being listened to or of being misrepresented by the powerful, all pervasive media organisations. Even today many of my childhood memories must compete with the plethora of photojournalistic images that have come to represent that time and place. My relationship with these photographs is a constantly shifting and paradoxical combination of antagonism and fascination.

One of the characteristics of the colonial and sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland has been the persistent importance of religious, ethnic and cultural labels. There was just no escaping the pejorative uses of Unionist or Nationalist, Catholic or Protestant, Loyalist or Republican and I, like the majority of the population, had inherited the usual historical baggage of these sectarian assumptions, without really realising it.

That was, until I walked into the Ormeau Baths Gallery, in Belfast, in 1993 and encountered the work of Willie Doherty. I was motivated by an ignorant curiosity, as I was already interested in photography but as yet, I had no artistic education to speak of. However, the works on show fundamentally altered the way I thought about the place I had been brought up in. The works by Doherty and later Paul Graham and Paul Seawright, reacted against the traditional representations of news photography that labelled victims or indeed perpetrators of the conflict as Catholic or Protestant, Republican or Loyalist, Security Forces or Terrorist.

These artists had understood the unruly ambiguity of photographic representation and used their images in a manner that I had never experienced before. By raising questions about representative practices, they also questioned our contested interpretations of events and histories. In essence, the works that I encountered, confronted me with my own inherited and unacknowledged sectarian assumptions. The experience fundamentally changed the way I saw the political landscape of Northern Ireland, and my own place within it. The ambiguity inherent within the images created by these artists, existed for me, at the confluence of aesthetic practice and personal experience, in the vital and charged overlap between art and the everyday. They allowed space for a more discursive response and nuanced consideration of the historical and geographic context for ‘The Troubles’ and in the process reclaimed a functional, even socio-political, role for aesthetics generally and art practices in particular.

This experience has formed the foundation of my fascination with photographic representation, in the various discourses that direct how certain types of photography are used and understood, from photojournalism to contemporary art, family snapshots to passport portraits. In essence however my professional interest lies within the exploration of how documentary photographic practices can utilize the more open and experimental art discourses that maintains in principle at least a social agency. In an article titled ‘Sharing the Power’, published in the Journal *Perspektief,* (1991) the anthropologist Jay Ruby stated:

*The grandiose expectations we had about documentary media are exhausted. It should be possible to construct a practice with modest aspirations. One that neither pretends it has the power to change the world nor a desire to pity but instead aids in our attempt to comprehend and critique a world grown increasingly incomprehensible* (Ruby 1991: 17).

The rationale for this paper therefore is to continue the debate that has surrounded documentary practice that operates in dialogue with audiences and a range of overlapping discourses from vernacular photography to contemporary art. More explicitly the aim of the research is to find a new way to consider the use of documentary images, which not only seeks an audience but also invites participation.

From the 1970s the critiques of photographic representation have been important in challenging and transforming documentary practices. The experimentation by photographers responding to these challenges has increasingly occurred within an art discourse, whose primary forms of dissemination have circulated through exhibition or specialist publication. While the boundaries between art and documentary have become indistinct, the dialectic between these seemingly polar opposite contexts remains. Allan Sekula in his seminal collection of essays *Photography Against the Grain* (1983) charted the transformation of the photograph as it travels from document to artwork, as the swing of the “hermeneutic pendulum as it careens from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist*”* (Sekula 1983: 58).For Sekula, the effect is that the photograph’s relationship to its referent is lost in favour of its new significance as an act of self-expression of the artist*.*

The dialectical debate that surrounds photographic practice can be simplified into the opposition of the photograph as an objective record verses its status as expressive image. The photograph as an objective, or at least trustworthy document, grew out of its astonishing attention to detail, that in conjunction with the authority of the professional photographer, justified traditional documentary photography. The invention of photography as high art, however, is grounded in the rhetoric of romanticism and symbolism, that sought to situate the photograph as the autonomous art object that acts as the expression of the privileged subjectivity of the glorified artist.

In 2006 the Tate Liverpool held an exhibition *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 until now*. Citing John Grierson’s definition of the term documentary as the creative treatment of actuality, the exhibition sought to reconcile the transformations of British documentary with art practices that had sought to interrogate, challenge or respond to the variety of socio-economic or political conditions. In the April 2006 edition of *Art Monthly*, the writer and critic Sarah James used the Tate’s *Making History* exhibition to argue, however, that the predominant influence of an art discourse has been the retreat of documentary practices from the public sphere.

Sarah James uses Richard Sennett’s critique of art discourses that seek to disavow any social/political agency in what she termed ‘today’s tyranny of intimacy’ (James, 2006, p. 1). Sennett argues that much contemporary art can be characterised by a suspicion of the ‘real’, ruling out any claims to objectivity. The rejection of these claims to represent the ‘reality of things’ is embedded in the discourse that frames the majority contemporary art practices, which has in effect undermined any credence given to attempts to ‘make things better’. James argues that this suspicion of artistic practice that attempts social investigation to ameliorate social ills has had a major impact on contemporary documentary practices which now operating within these spaces..

However the retreat from the real need not automatically lead to an abandonment of social agency. While much contemporary art practice holds no claims to ‘make things better,’ there is a strong history of artistic practices that directly challenged the social order, with precisely that purpose in mind.

The means by which contemporary photographic practice can impact on the social order can be explored using Rancière’s understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and his notion of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ from his book *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004).

For Rancière, the social order is a set of implicit rules and conventions, which determine the distribution of roles in a given community and the forms of exclusion that operate within it. This order is founded on what he terms the 'distribution of the sensible'. Here he is referring to the way in which roles and modes of participation in a common social world are determined by establishing possible modes of perception.

Within this framework Ranciere’s notion of aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense “as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2004: 13). We can consider aesthetics therefore as a means to help us explore the meeting point between our raw sense perception and the meaning that is produced from it. This very deliberately reduced notion of aesthetics has the effect of opening out its utility far beyond the usual rhetoric of the ‘art expert’ or connoisseur, allowing the delineations between art, politics and the everyday to overlap.

*Aesthetics is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise… Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time* (Rancière 2004: 13).

To reduce the relationship between politics and aesthetics to its most basic fundamentals, allows us to reconsider all previous practices with a more useful framework and affords a social or political agency to a greater span of representational practices.

Again For Rancière, the critique of representative practices can be traced back to Plato’s denunciation of the mimesis of theatre. Plato argued that theatrical productions are places where spectators were “invited to see people suffering, as a spectacle of pathos,” to produce passive audiences, through the ‘optical machinary’ of illusion (Rancière 2009: 3). Within this setting there is a definitive distinction between ‘looking’ and ‘doing.’ The actor on the stage holds the position of power as they are actively producing the effects of the play that the audiences passively receives. ‘The spectacle’ therefore has become a short-hand metaphor for the discusive frameworks that have produced passivity and self alienation.

As a means to move beyond this, Rancière uses his concept of intellectual emancipation that he first explored in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1981)*.* According to Rancière, the role of the schoolmaster is to abolish the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the student. However, within a traditional pedagogical logic, this can only be undertaken on the condition that the distance is constantly maintained. In essence, the student learns not only their inability to know, but also *what* to know and *how* to know it. The main activity of this pedagogical logic therefore, is to constantly confirm its own presupposition: the inequality of intelligences.

We can equate the role of the schoolmaster, to various radical critiques and art practices that have sought to ‘awaken’ the audiences from their passivity and alienation. From the theatre of Brecht to Debord’s ‘situations’, these various attempts to challenge the spectacle are for Ranciere still based on the assumed oppositions between the image and living reality, speaker and spectator, which does not challenge the *a priori* logic of intellectual inequality.

Instead Rancière calls for an intellectual emancipation that is based on the *a priori* logic of an equality of intelligence; in effect the schoolmaster must accept his own ignorance. The foundational premise of this emancipation is that intelligence is not a position to be held, rather the relationship between the schoolmaster and the student is one of dialogue and discussion, an activity that Rancière refers to as “the poetic labour of translation” (Rancière 2009: 11).

Adopting the *a priori* logic of intellectual emancipation, and engaging in the activity of poetic translation reconnects art practices into historical processes and the everyday. While there is no ‘eternal’ to Rancière’s notion of artworks, he does however afford a potentially more radical role to art, in its aesthetic function of shifting the distribution of the sensible.

*Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility* (Rancière 2004: 13).

Therefore, there is no absolute distinction given to art practice, no privileged subjectivity afforded to the photographer/artist and no higher plane from which it operates. Importantly Rancière’s description of art practices as ‘ways of doing and making,’ purposely avoids the limiting notion of a pre-determined outcome.

The notion of a predicable and desired effect from photography is one of the many myths that documentary practice fell into in the twentieth-century. Still today, photojournalists will cite the hope that bearing witness to events through photographs will ‘somehow’ lead others to act to end the oppression or violence that forms much of the subject matter of this genre.

The importance of denying a pre-determined out-come for contemporary photographic practices can be considered using Rancière’s conception of the ‘aesthetic regime’ that he constructs to describe a more socially relevant discursive framework for art practices.

“Many contemporary artists no longer set out to create works of art. Instead, they want to get out of the museum, and induce alterations in the space of everyday life, generating new forms of relations.” (Ranciere 2009: 53)

The aesthetic regime is understood to support art practices that seek to break the links between language and meaning, and to disrupt the relationship between articulation and reception. The ideal artwork, within the aesthetic regime creates what he calls ‘heterologies’:

*The notion of ‘heterology’ refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed… The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle* (Rancière 2009: 63).

The function of the artwork within this regime is to offer a different perspective by challenging assumed positions or hierarchies, to disrupt or rupture the distribution of the sensible. The most important aspect of artworks within the aesthetic regime is that the effect of such ruptures can never be pre-determined, as Rancière states, “art, cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world” (ibid.). Within Rancière’s aesthetic regime, successful artworks operate within a paradox that Rancière describes as:

*Always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning* (ibid.).

While there is an essential indeterminacy to the political orientation or outcome for the encounter between the artwork and its audience, the relationship between aesthetics and politics is maintained. This indeterminacy created by the disruption of the sensible is the invitation or challenge for the viewer of the artwork to redistribute the sensible from the ruptured fragments. This affords the viewer or spectator an essentially active, indeed creative role within this encounter, providing a much more nuanced and practical relationship with art and its potential for social agency.

For me then the social agency of photographic practices lie within maintaining a ‘productive tension’ created by the photograph’s paradoxical roles of documentation and the aesthetic abstraction of events or moments, that is a vital force in the use of photographs as discursive documents.

One means of considering this productive tension, this paradoxical double function is through an exploration of the subversive and transgressive qualities of the literary genre, ‘Magical Realism.’

While the term magical realism in its modern sense first appeared in 1955 in relation to Spanish American fiction, the phrase was first coined in 1925 by the German art critic Franz Roh, to refer to a new post-expressionist art movement in the Weimar Republic known as New Objectivity.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is important to note that Roh believed magical realism was related to but distinctive from surrealism.

The influence and relationship between surrealism and photography has been explored extensively and even though magical realism and surrealism both explore the illogical or non-realist, it is important to note some vital differences.

According to Maggie Ann Bowers, Surrealism seeks to express the sub-conscious, unconscious, the repressed and inexpressible. Magical realism, on the other hand, focus’s on the material object and the actual existence of things and rarely presents the extraordinary in the form of a dream or a *psychological experience*. As Bowers writes, “The ordinariness of magical realism's magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and *material reality*."

It is the oxymoronic ambiguity of the term Magical Realism that makes it so useful in discussing photographic practice. The productive tension created by the photograph’s indexical relationship to its referent and its abstraction into imagery is equivalent to Magical Realism’s inherent inclusion of contradictory elements. Lois Zamora and Wendy Farris suggest that because Magical Realism breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the real, it is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode… magical realism is a mode suited to exploring… and transgressing…. boundaries whether the Boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Magical Realism explores the impact fiction has on reality, reality on fiction and the reader’s role in between; as such, it is well suited for drawing attention to social or political criticism.

Bowers argues that the root of Magical Realism’s transgressive and subversive aspect lies in the fact that*,*

*“once the category of truth has been brought into question and the category of the real broken down or overturned, the boundaries of other categories become vulnerable. The reader becomes aware that if the category of the real is not definitive then all assumptions of truth are also at stake.”* P. 67-68.

To begin with our relationship with photography has always flirted with the magical… as the power of the camera to record the visible, in astonishing detail quickly spilled over into a belief in the camera to record the invisible, the paranormal as exemplified by the early exponents of ‘spiritualist photography’ first established here in America by William H Murnier, and picked up by later photographers in Europe and elsewhere.

The role of the magical in magical realism is not to use photography to prove the existence of the magical, such as in early in ‘spiritualist photography’ but to challenge the dominant social order. The role of the photograph in this instance is not to prove to what is, but to point towards what is possible.

An artist who use’s the fantastical qualities of the photographic image is the Manchester based Argentinian artist/photographer Seba Kurtis

In 2001 after Argentina had suffered its second financial crisis in his life-time Seba fled to Europe on a tourist visa, ending up in Tenerife, where he found illegal work on construction sites. Where says “You’re treated like a second-class citizen because you don’t have ‘the right’ to be there,…”

Seba worked for a number of years to help bring his family over to Spain, and as so often happens in such situations one of the few possessions that they family could bring with them was a treasured collection of photographs, stored in a shoebox… Sadly however in the intervening years the house in Argentina had been flooded, damaging the images…

The images then not only recorded those moments traditionally considered worthy of being photographed, becoming infused with the familial love and attention, but also through some alchemical process the images seem to have continued to record the traces of sadness, separation even despair caused by economic ruin and forced emigration.

So for over a decade now, Kurtis has made work on immigration, that has become arguably one of the defining issues of our age. While Seba is reluctant to equate his relatively easy entry into Europe with the current refugee crisis (I came on a plane…) his work stems from his own experience and importantly those of the people he worked alongside with as illegal immigrants. In a recent article in BJP Kurtis wryly observed

*“A decade ago, nobody was talking about how many dead bodies were floating in the Mediterranean. I was so shocked to hear African migrants’ stories of family and friends who had died making their way to Morocco, paying thousands to traffickers and then drowning on their way to the Canaries.”*

In 2008 then he returned to Tenerife to photograph the fenced-off coastline that greets survivors of the perilous boat journeys …

He then took the boxes of undeveloped negatives and threw them into the ocean, in effect drowning the photographs before retrieving the battered images that floated back to shore. The resultant pictures seemed to have soaked up the sadness and mourning of the un-numbered, un-named souls lost at sea, and in an act of solidarity or perhaps empathy Seba paired the bleak landscapes with the family photographs that had survived the flood back home in Argentina.

In 2012, now resident in the UK, Seba was once again confronted with his own precarious status, when he was detained en-route to Italy, to work on a commission by Fotografia Europea, photography festival.

 “I didn’t have a visa to travel so I was detained. The Home Office invited me to leave, basically – even though my wife is British and we have three kids.”

He contacted the curators at the photofestival suggesting a project in England instead, returning to an idea he had been working on… resulting in the work, *Thicker than Water…* His work was based on a news repost that lauded a new means to detect migrants who had been smuggled onto goods lorries driving to the UK..

“One of the ways the police in Britain detect the illegal transportation of migrants is by using heartbeat detectors in lorries,” he says.

The detectors use a software to amplify and filter the sound recorded by the microphones, seeking to expose any migrants hiding inside the trucks. As a response Kurtis photographed individuals who had been caught and were being held in detention centres in England. He deliberatley over-exposed the images so that the developed film came out completely blank.. Then he scanned the film and in Photoshop, he pushed the levels up to reveal the information still held within the image.

The migrant then was made visible, but not captured by the controlling gaze of the camera, but made recognisable as a fellow human being through the surprising aesthetic celebration of their presence.

The tension between the photograph as a document and as an artwork is stretched here, almost to breaking point…. But not quite and is instead reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s reading of Hill and Adamson’s 1840’s portrait of the Newhaven Fishwife

*In photography, however, one encounters a new and strange phenomenon: in the fishwife from Newhaven, who casts her eyes down with such casual, seductive shame, there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of Hill the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art* (Benjamin 1977: 7).

This crucial quote uses the indexical quality of the photograph to allow it to escape the reductive reading of an image in purely formal terms. The tendency to view art in purely affective terms is continually resisted by the photograph’s relationship to actuality and the complexities of the histories of the individual.

In a similar vein Seba Kurtis’ work challenges the dehumanizing framework of legality that seeks to limit and filter the movement of people fleeing poverty, oppression and war., breaking the stereotypical depiction of this important issue in terms of the ‘mass’ movement of people, foregrounding the undeniable, humanity and dignity of each individual.

The disruptive, transgressive qualities ascribed to magical realism, may not be applicable to a totality of photographic practices, but one example of where it can enrich our engagement is with the work of Walid Raad and in particular with his work as the Atlas Group.

According to the Atlas Group website,

“The Atlas group is a project established in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon. One of our aims with this project is to locate, preserve, study, and produce audio, visual, literary and other artefacts that shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon. In this endeavour, we produced and found several documents including notebooks, films, videotapes, photographs and other objects. Moreover, we organised these works in an archive. The Atlas Group Archive. The project’s public forms include mixed-media installations, single channel screenings, visual and literary essays, and lectures/performances”

One of the files donated to the archive, filed under ‘File Type A: Authored files: Raad File. Is a document called

Let’s be honest the weather helped

The Foreword to this document reads

The following plates are attributed to Walld Raad who donated them to the Atlas Group in 1998. In the statement accompanying the donation, Raad noted:

Like many around me in Beirut in the early 1980’s, I collected bullets and shrapnel. I would run out to the streets after a night or day of shelling to remove bullets from walls, cars, and trees. I kept detailed notes of where I found every bullet by photographing the sites of my findings, and by placing colored dots over the bullet holes in my black and white photographs. The colour of the dots corresponded to the mesmerizing hues I found on bullet’s tips. The colours were also faithful to the distinct code devised by manufacturers in different countries to mark their cartridges and shells. Over the years, and to complement my collection, I purchased bullets from vendors on the streets, seeking out the entire spectrum of colors that adorned the tips of the 7.62 X 43mm cartridge used in AK-47s or the 5.45X 45mm cartridge used in M-16s. It took me 25 years to realise that my notebooks had all along catalogued the 23 countries that had armed or sold ammunitions to the various militias and armies fighting the Lebanese wars, including the U.S., U.K, Saudi Arabia, Israel, France, Switzerland, and China..

The project accords well with Ranciere’s hetereologies as the subsequent images blends beautifully the rhetoric of empirical documentation and aesthetic seduction. The Lebanese conflict was predominantly presented and narrated as a religious, sectarian conflict, very reminiscent of the way ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland were represented. However Raad creates a series of montages that bring together the Fantastic and the Everyday, the real and the magical to expose the global politics and importantly the Armaments industry that had (usually unspoken) vested interests, in perpetuating this ‘civil war.’ (Given an added pertinence, by the fact we are just down the road from a large Lockheed Martin complex.)

Thinking about Raad’s work as montage, I would like to finish on one last point that helps maintain the productive tension require to facilitate debate. According to Ben Highmore, in his book *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (2002), “there is a huge potential for montage to generate critical forms of reading, by making contradictions and antagonisms explicit within the social realm” (Highmore 2002: 90).

When successful the practice of montage, “is an aesthetic of experimentation that recognizes that actuality always outstrips the procedures for registering it” (Highmore 2002: 91). That actuality will always contain elements that are unseen, unrecognised. In the same manner as Magical Realism ,montage can work to maintain a ‘plentitude’ to what is possible, offering the possibility to speak against totalitarian regimes, by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely. So, returning Franz Roh who coined the term Magic Realism in 1925..

“with the word ‘magic,’ as opposed to ‘mystic,’ I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it..,” (Zamora & Farris eds. 1995:16)g

This paper then has been a tentative statement of belief in the photograph’s potential to engender debate, not as to ‘how things are’ but to ‘what is possible’. I am not seeking to understand what photography is, but to construct a theoretical position on how photographs can be more effectively used. This may at first sight seem crazily optimistic or even damned by the label ‘utopian’, in a cynical, alienated society characterised by self-interest. Yet, in a world dominated by fake news, impossible walls and economic precarity, it is more important than ever to hold onto a belief in the possibility of a more egalitarian society is not about building a rigid belief system. On the contrary, it is about creating space to effectively challenge dogmatic thinking and established power relations.

1. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" by Angel Flores in 1955 and has since then come to be considered to refer to a literature genre and indeed primarily with Latin American Literature.

*Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the most recent European Painting.*

(1925) Franz Roh. The Artists he discussed included, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, and George Grosz, whose work has become associated with New Objectivity movement coined by Max Beckmann in 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)