

MODULE 8.

ETHICAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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Learning outcomes

«There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.» (Arundhati Roy)

We are used to seeing photography as a form of contemplation or a leisure activity, yet as an art form, it is an active one. And any activity brings with it, to a greater or lesser extent, a transformation of its surroundings. Art in general, and photography in particular - despite having been used and instrumentalized on infinite occasions by those who hold power - is not an obsequious transmitter of information: on the contrary, it can be a very powerful tool of freedom of expression. Photography and images are a source of empowerment for people and groups who face situations of exclusion and vulnerability, and who need to make themselves visible. It can also serve as a tool to speak out against situations of injustice in this globalized and unequal world. All of this, however, must be undertaken from an ethical, respectful and empathetic perspective. This module will provide a broad overview, with the aim of making you aware of how you can use the camera as a tool for social transformation, and the reasons behind doing so.



KNOWLEDGE

- Acquire knowledge of the power of photography as a creative and transformative tool.
- Understand art as a means of expression for personal development.



SKILLS

- Develop a critical perspective, with the aim of raising awareness, fomenting reflection and promoting change in society.
- Use photography to take action and instigate a change in people's behaviour.



ATTITUDES

- Participate actively, contributing to public involvement in and political advocacy for grassroots social change.
- Work on ethical criteria. Analyze and evaluate the limits of photography on the ground.

Photojournalism and memory

Phan Thi Kim is known as the Napalm girl. She was nine years old when, in June 1972, a Douglas A-1 Skyraider aircraft belonging to the South Vietnamese army carried out an incendiary attack on the town of Trang Bang. "Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius, napalm creates temperatures of between 800 and 1,200 degrees," says Thi Kim. "It's the most terrible pain imaginable". She was hospitalized for 14 months, and required multiple skin transplants.

As Thi Kim fled the horror, her body soaked in napalm, Associated Press photojournalist Nick Ut released the shutter on his camera. The photograph travelled around the globe and won a Pulitzer Prize. It is one of the defining images of the Vietnam war: a photograph burned into the retina of many, and one of a number which constitute the collective memory of the conflict.

Photography is a source of truth, a means of documenting something to attest to it. This is one of its great powers: it offers the possibility of immortalizing a situation or a given context, making it both tangible and perceptible. It offers access to an event, and builds up our collective memory of it. It gives structure to memory and, by extension, to identity. It is a fundamental part of constructing the way society talks about any given event. As such, photography is a key piece in the machinery of historical memory-building. We could try to think of an occurrence fundamental to our collective and individual identity, and attempt to imagine it without images. Are we capable of doing so?

Can we reflect on the Spanish Civil War without thinking of the photographs of Gerda Taro and Robert Capa? When we think of the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, what comes to mind? The image of a man in front of a row of four tanks of the Chinese army, immortalized by S. Franklin. How would we have experienced the September 11th attacks in New York without images? Or the crisis of the European Union's asylum and refugee policy, without the iconic photograph of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Kurdish boy photographed by Nilüfer Demir on the beach in Bodrum, Turkey in 2016? We might wish to consider these historical events based on a hypothetical absence of images. We could also think about how this provides fuel for fans of *conspiracy theories*, in a *fake news*, post-truth context. We will delve deeper into these two particular concepts later.

For the moment, let us cast our minds back to some of the most iconic photographs that have left their mark on the West's collective memory of the twentieth century.



Image 8.1.
Nick Ut

*"I went to help her instantly because her skin was peeling off her arm and back. I didn't want her to die. I left my camera and started throwing water over her, then I put her in my car and we went to the hospital, knowing that she could die at any moment."
"The Vietnam War ended thanks to this photograph."*



Image 8.2.
Eddie Adams

"The general killed a Vietcong with his pistol. I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn't say was, "What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?"



Image 8.3.
Jeff Widener

"I was about to take pictures of the row of tanks when I suddenly saw an unarmed man walking towards them. At first I thought he was going to screw up my photo, but I held off, thinking that at any moment they were going to shoot him."



Image 8.4.
Kevin Carter

"It's the most important photo of my career, but I'm not proud of it, I don't even want to see it, I hate it. I still regret that I didn't help the girl."

In taking a look at these iconic images, the lack of female photographers may seem striking. As in any field, there are relatively few women who have been afforded prominence in the world of professional photography. To illustrate the point, some of them even had to sign their photographs with male names.

This is the case of the photographer Gerda Taro, who, together with her husband Endre Erno Friedmann, devised the name of Robert Capa to deceive high-profile magazines and make them believe that they were hiring a prestigious American male photographer. "At that time, during the Spanish Civil War, it was easier to be an imaginary character with an attractive name than a woman [...] The quality of your work didn't matter." (Fernando Sánchez, 2020). To learn more, see this [article](#).

The media is one of the key sources of information through which individuals build their perception of reality and, therefore, their attitude towards the events that are reported on. By the same token, photojournalism is one of the pillars of mass media storytelling. We cannot speak of photography as a tool for social change without first taking these points into consideration.

A crisis in journalism and the digital age

The internet has changed the way we access information. The impact of the digital age on the world of communication and journalism has led to the circulation of large volumes of information, the likes of which would have been unthinkable decades ago. It has also thrust an array of key players onto media landscape, and brought about an exponential increase in digital media with no corresponding print outlet, as a result of the lower costs involved in maintaining a digital front page versus a traditional, paper-based one (Becerra, 2016; Lazer et. al., 2018).

In this new media and information paradigm, algorithms play a key role. The information we consume, and how we consume it, is personalized on the basis of individualized tracking and data collection. This means that, depending on our individual virtual consumption habits - what websites we visit, what information we consume - the information that each of us sees is different. The classic example is the news that appears on social media. This type of media is based on algorithms and, as a result, **virtual reality bubbles** emerge: we are shown only the news with which we agree or sympathize, that which matches our values and ideologies. At the same time, we tend to relate to those people with whom we share opinions. This is also replicated in the virtual world. As a result, tolerance of differing opinions is reduced, and the **polarization of attitudes** is amplified. This increases the likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible content and/or publications as genuine. This is nothing new, of course¹, yet the impact of the digital age on our everyday lives amplifies it.

¹ **Selective exposure** is the tendency of individuals to seek out perspectives akin to our own, within similarly constructed ideological spaces, through which media consumption is consequently selective and tends to reinforce our pre-established points of view (Kapper, 1957).

The gap between seeing things and understanding them is greater now than ever, with the everyday reality of information overload or overdose discussed above creating a climate in which it is increasingly difficult to analyze the root causes of human rights abuses. Indeed, in the present context of a breaking down of boundaries between the virtual and the tangible, **post-truth** and **fake news** are characteristic concepts of our time.

Oxford Dictionaries chose *post-truth* as the word of the year in 2016. Katherine Viener, editor of The Guardian, published an article that same year entitled *How technology disrupted the truth*. The author defined the concept of "fact" as "merely a view that someone feels to be true", as a result of an emotional connection to it. The blurring of the boundary

between fact and opinion finds its material form in the emergence of fake news on a global scale, brought about - as we have previously described - by the advent of the digital age. This translates into the following axiom: if it moves us, then it is true. We will return to this dangerous equation later.

We might understand **post-truth** as “fabricated information that mimics the content of media news in form, but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al, 2018: 1094). Consequently, we see erroneous information overlap with misinformation, the key element of the latter being the intent to deceive. The digital age has facilitated the spread of fake news and, at the same time, has paved the way for a large number of new players in the field of communications, owing to the reduced cost of entry to new competitors, as previously discussed. This has eroded the business model of the traditional media, which had historically enjoyed high levels of trust and social credibility.

Cascades of unverified or unchecked information have resulted, and Pulitzer 's "fact-fact-fact" seems doomed to exist in another, more archaic time and place. Journalism's social commitment has been shaken by a type of reporting beholden to commercial norms (Estefania, 2003, in Vidal, 2004). These are the **industries of consciousness**, according to de Baeza (2003).

Any attempt to use photography as a tool for social change without prior awareness, and in the context we have just set out, can be dangerous. Does it make sense to do so in these circumstances? To see things is no longer to understand them, with the everyday reality of information overload creating a climate in which it is increasingly difficult to ascertain, and above all, to analyze the root causes of human rights abuses. From rational criterion to emotional springboard: if a given news piece, photograph or tweet stimulates an emotional reaction in us, we automatically afford it a degree of veracity. At this juncture, pornodrama is what's being served up.

Poverty porn

Pornodrama according to Díez Guitérrez (2015), or poverty porn according to E. Roenigk (2014): the medium may change subtly, but same equation applies to the message. One of the most iconic photographs to emerge from what has been called the "refugee crisis" was that of the body of Aylan Kurdi, taken by the Turkish photographer Nilufer Demir. Kurdi was a two-year-old boy who drowned on Bodrum beach. It is the quintessential example of pornodrama, according to Gutierrez, in that it is a photograph which confronts and stirs our emotions, and stimulates a need for immediate action.

Heartache; the relief of charity; a donation to a large NGO, sharing outrage over social media, and all without asking ourselves what sort of circumstances and structural violence led to this event. In other words, we fail to ask who the agents responsible for the given situation are, and, moreover, who benefits from it. What goes unseen, goes unheard: there is no geopolitical analysis, no unequal relations in a globalized context.

E. Roenigk delves a little deeper in an article in the *Huffington Post*, and puts forward the reasons why this practice among the media ought to be repudiated. Her reasons are as follows: firstly, because it represents poverty as a simple, non-complex issue, and depicts those affected as having homogeneous material needs. Secondly, because it leads to charity, and does not emphasize structural conditions; it gives power to the wrong person. Lastly, because it operates within the schematics and objectives of large Non-Governmental Organizations: marketing, corporate communication and, ultimately, profits derived from donations. It is precisely these elements that we must take into account when photographing, and above all communicating, circumstances in which human rights abuses take place. The journalist and sociologist, and former director of *Le Monde diplomatique* Ignacio Ramonet calls it the **one centimetre-deep ocean**: "To inform today is essentially to provide entry to the event, to put it on display" (Ramonet, 1998 to Vidal, 2004).

How should we approach press photography, or the volition to use photojournalism to speak out against human rights abuses? How should we approach photography as a tool for social change?

Ethical Photojournalism and a Human Rights Approach

In the face of the abyss, human rights are what holds us back from the brink. For the first time in the history of the capitalist truth industry - what Baeza terms the industries of consciousness, which we have already discussed - we are faced with the advent of a form of journalism that is governed exclusively by commercial norms, and is far removed from any notion of civic responsibility (Estefania, 2003, in Vidal, 2004).

Leila Guerriero, an Argentine journalist and writer, claims that objective journalism is a fiction. There is no clear basis on which a human rights approach is understood. Patricia Simón (2017), journalist, cites various authors and organizations in order to introduce us to the subject, starting from the definitions of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)² and the HEGOA Institute, ultimately arriving at a synthesis of journalism with a human rights approach.

² This organization states on its website that "the purpose of the Human Rights approach is to analyze the inequalities at the heart of development problems, and to correct discriminatory practices and the unfair distribution of power that hinder progress in the area of development".

This type of journalism is one that "picks out the elements that affect sectors of society, groups or individuals in a particularly vulnerable situation, whose rights are in danger or have been violated, and analyzes them from a Human Rights perspective. It is a journalism which addresses issues (politics, economics, environment, education), and puts the impact that these have on the rights of the general public at the centre of its investigation and commentary." (Patrícia Simón, 2017). It is a clearly-defined position, and very similar to that laid out in the *Manifesto on Journalism and Human Rights*, presented by the Pulitzer Prize winner Javier Bauluz in mid-2008.

Ethical photojournalism: how can we photograph violence?

There are no magic formulae, nor clear-cut roadmaps. We need to raise our own awareness, view ourselves objectively, and understand the position we occupy in the world. Where were we born? In a well-to-do neighbourhood, or among the urban sprawl of commuter towns? What does it mean to be a woman, or to be a man? Have I always been able to choose the field I've sought work in? What are the privileges that shape me as a person and structure my day-to-day life? Class, gender and background. With this journey as our starting point - one which some may call introspection, while others would call it political awareness - we can consciously position ourselves in the world. By extension, we will be able to photograph the events that we wish to report on from a position of empathy and respect. Photojournalism in the context of human rights violations suffered by migrants or asylum seekers serves as a case in point. We will now analyze a number of practical cases which can serve as a springboard for a range of activities.



PROPOSED ACTIVITIES

1. The context in which a photograph is published is of the utmost importance, as is the text that accompanies it. A photograph taken out of context is always susceptible to being used as a tool for manipulation. Look at the following photographs and reflect on the following questions: does the photograph reinforce the situation of vulnerability, or the condemnation of it? What position does the photographer adopt in the face of the situation? Why? Bear in mind that there are no right or wrong answers: the key is to understand what role the specific photograph plays in each of the reports presented.

PHOTO 1

Summary of the report/photograph: Social exclusion in Barcelona

Author: Fotomovimiento

PHOTO 2

Summary of the report/photograph: Migration to the United States in the 1930s

Author: Dorothea Lange

PHOTO 3

Summary of the report/photograph: Refugee camps in Greece

Author: Fotomovimiento

PHOTO 4

Summary of the report/photograph: The civil war in Georgia

Author: Cristina García Rodero

2. Read the chapter "Els voltors", from the book "Migrar i resistir" (Editorial Descontrol) by Fotomovimiento photographer/volunteer/activist Mònica Parra.

In your opinion:

- What boundaries should there be between photographing for informative and reporting purposes, and respect for the situation in which the people you photograph find themselves?
- What do you think you could contribute as a volunteer, and as an agent for social change, through photography?
- What differences do you see between conventional and independent media?

3. Looking for two photojournalists involved in social photography who identify as women. They're not easy to find, are they? Check out the documentary Una Entre Tots, about the life of Joana Biarnés. Then ask yourself: do you think women have the same opportunities to access the world of photography, and to be recognized in the same way, as men?



WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

- 1.** Take photographs that help raise awareness of human rights abuses.
— Pay attention to both visible and invisible situations and problems. What can you contribute? How can you help?
— Photograph moments or events that cause the observer to reflect.
- 2.** Treat all people, religions, communities and cultures with respect and dignity.
- 3.** Do not publish images that are demeaning.
- 4.** Do not take photographs that may cause you feelings of guilt in the future, either as a result of infringing the rights of others, or potentially causing harm to third parties. Avoid sensationalist photographs, or ones which victimize the subject photographed. Empower others and empower yourself!
- 5.** Use non-discriminatory, non-androcentric language which dispels stereotypes.
- 6.** Give a voice to the countries of the Global South, and those which find themselves in a situation of social crisis: they should have the chance to explain the situation or problem in their own words. Whenever you can, provide a first-hand account of your photography.
- 7.** Always ask for the person's consent to be photographed.
- 8.** Be especially careful with pictures of children.
- 9.** Look for inspiring images. Avoid the sort of photographs to which we are accustomed: it is important that we all look for different ways to visualize the world and build our memory of it.
- 10.** The world is full of stories to tell. Observe and listen. Then take a picture.



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