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CRITICAL CONTEXTUAL STUDIES

CP5014 ETHICS

Ethical issues have been a huge part of design for many years. The powerful documentation of national dilemmas based on the ways we act as human beings, our personal beliefs, opinions, points of view and values.

Photo Journalism is also a massive part of design; documenting current events that have been captured to help archive the history of single moments. Photojournalist, Edward Steichen referred to this genre as *"a major force in explaining man to man"*[1] A collection of individual images depicting our own or others experiences; helping us to understand the importance of history, collecting, editing and broadcasting images that visually show the in-depth historical stories.

"Photography changes how the world was recorded" - **Steven Heller**[2]

Design is a way of making the world more aware of past or present news that only a few may have witnessed, shaping one's individual personal memories. If I could have it my way, art and design would create a positive impact on life for all of us, helping every individual to feel safe and content. A more humbled society and a world full of positivity could bring us together. Negativity only brings trauma, upset and disappointment. Some say *'What we don't know won't hurt us'.* However, we need to know about our world's dramas and tragedies and doing so through different aspects of design and imagery creates a much stronger message.

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[1] Photojournalist, Edward Steichen referred to this genre as a *"major force in explaining man to man"*, Photography Changes Everything, **Marvin Heiferman**

[2] *"Photography changes how the world was recorded"* - **Steven Heller,** Photography Changes Everything, **Marvin Heiferman**

"When we talk about the value of arts and culture, we should always start with the intrinsic – how arts and culture illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world. This is what we cherish." - **Sir Peter Bazalgette**[3]

This stunning shot taken by student and Photographer, Robert C. Wiles has had a huge effect on many people. An unexpected incident happened in New York on May 1st, 1947. This detailed black and white image illustrates the death of Evelyn McHale; an attractive, 23 year old female who committed suicide. At first I thought it could have been a beautifully staged image, her body seemed to be in a elegant pose, sleeping peacefully, somewhere tranquil, on top of rocks. As the truth of this image was revealed to me it made me realise just how blind eyed we can be towards art.

Evelyn McHale had jumped from the roof and the photograph was taken just after her death. Her body lays on top of a crushed limousine below the Empire State building, her legs crossed and hands close to her face, in a similar pose to a curvaceous brass sculpture. This is known to be one of the most famous portraits of suicide. Her death shocked many and most of her life is still unknown to this day. Although many have helped us to understand the history of what may have been behind this tragedy, she had left behind nothing more than a hand written letter to her father and husband.

The Most Beautiful Suicide
Photography By Robert C. Wiles, 1947

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[3] *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* - **Andrew Mowlah, Vivien Niblett, Jonathon Blackburn and Marie Harris** - Arts Council, England.

"I don't want anyone in or out of my family to see any part of me. Could you destroy my body by cremation? I beg of you and my family – don't have any service for me or remembrance for me. ~~My fiancé asked me to marry him in June. I don't think I would make a good wife for anybody.~~ He is much better off without me. Tell my father, I have too many of my mother's tendencies." - **Evelyn McHale, The Letter**[4]

Her body was soon cremated as she wished and once her body had been sent to the fire nothing was left of Evelyn. She remained as just a memory to those who knew her and those who didn't. So many unanswered questions still stand; what really pushed her to jump and was her life really that bad that she couldn't take anymore?

Should it be acceptable to take photographs involving death? is a question most of us think about when seeing images similar to *The Most Beautiful Suicide*. To have suicidal intent, a human being is usually in some way linked with depression, a strong need to escape and put an end to their pain and suffering. Even when a person is no longer with us, it is still important to respect their privacy. Their heart may have stopped and last breath been taken but they are still vulnerable to the outside world, predators capturing their image without consent is something they no longer have control over. This piece has been discussed during a University lecture with many of my peers who had different opinions about this one image. Some felt it was perfectly fine for the photograph to be published and broadcast worldwide despite the fact that Evelyn wanted to remain unknown.

"She is dead, she shouldn't have made her death so open to the public. She should have made a less public suicide. In the middle of New York City is not the best of places if she wanted to remain unknown" - **Student, London Met University**

Another former post graduate student expressed an opinion similar to mine, that she disagreed with the portrait and how it was unfair to show a young female's death in such a way by allowing onlookers to view the traumatic experience and photographs to be taken.

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[4] Evelyn McHale, *The Letter* - http://rarehistoricalphotos.com/beautiful-suicide-evelyn-mchale-leapt-death-empire-state-building-1947/

All that is shown is the published image without the back story, forcing viewers to imagine events without knowing the facts. The truth is hidden; the unknown details of *how, what, when, where and why?* remain unanswered. Photography changes the way we're willing to reveal ourselves to others around us, the truth will forever remain hidden without a complete background story.

"Photography can illustrate a true experience or event, but may also reveal an unspoken reality behind an image." - **Tien Nguyen**[5]

Another piece that stands strong within this subject is Fabienne Charisma's, *Dead Haitian Girl*. A young girl, aged 15, shot dead by the police, her body left to rest on the roof of a house in Haiti. People of the village walk past as if this is normal, a new day and another gone. The image on the left *(the original photograph)* suggests a strong sense of harsh dismissal.

Dead Haitian Girl | Photography by Fabienne Charisma, January 2010.

The image on the right is of seven photographers including the award winner Fabienne Charisma, taking individual snapshots of the young Haitian girl. Grey skies, dry land and others hard at work shows Haiti's cultural struggle. The girl's body moved, positioned and displayed enabled the photographers to take the perfect portrait and they felt no remorse after moving and handling her like a mannequin.

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[5] Who We Are, *Photography Changes Everything*, **Marvin Heiferman**

The *'punctum'* within this photograph was what she's clutched onto. At first I thought they were three large framed photographs of loved ones, which could have been her only precious possessions. Once reading the history of this piece it was revealed that she had stolen three very valuable paintings from a wrecked shop in downtown Port-au-Prince, not too far from her home town.

"Punctum - that unexpected flash which sometimes crosses this field." - Ronald Barthes[6]

A couple of the villagers stand in the background of this image, two men watching from a distance as the photographers continue their competition to take the winning picture. This truly saddens me to see that the photographers were clearly enjoying this moment. The *'studium'* of this image is how the people of Haiti understandably didn't try to stop this attack. Their facial expressions show a sense of fear and hopelessness, every single one of them going through the *'stigmatum'* of *having-been-there*. After the young girl was ambushed, the villagers must have felt they had no chance, the photographers being outsiders and not knowing exactly what they were capable of. Both of these images express awareness of poverty, how certain cultures are living in grave danger, with so little and fighting every day for survival.

"Studium - A field of cultural interest, a kind of education that allows discovery" - Ronald Barthes[7]

"Stigmatum - The 'having-been-there' of the things photographed. Photography gives us a "this will be" and a "this has been" in one and the same representation. Every photograph is then a chilling reminder of human morality" - Geoffrey Batchen[8]

This image could be looked at as a serious act of racism, with the help of the second image showing us who the photographers were. All being white and moving the body for their best interest is deluded. I strongly disagree with this image. No one in the world should have to go through something like this. The shooting was unacceptable. She may have committed a crime. However, there are many other ways of solving this incident. Similar to the photograph of Evelyn McHale, many questions still stand unanswered.

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[6] *Camera Lucida*, **Ronald Barthes**

[7] *Camera Lucida*, **Ronald Barthes**

[8] *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, **Geoffrey Batchen** (*Quoting Ronald Barthes*)

Both of the above images tested my emotions in many ways, and had made me realise not all images within history are known to be '*the truth*'. Many artists have rearranged a scene digitally and physically to create a moment that didn't one hundred percent exist. Changing an historical moment is wrong, there is no right.

The ASA, *The Advertising Standards Authority,* a Uk based company helps to keep all design, advertising and other creative works within the UK; legal, decent, honest and truthful. *Are Robert C. Wiles and Fabienne Charisma's images the above four things?* Both images don't stand true to all the above points, which is confusing as both images were broadcast worldwide.

Photography changes how cultural groups are represented and perceived, Looking at how historical photographs can reflect cultural stereotypes rather than complex truths - **Edwin Schupman**[9]

As we can see, people tend to admire others more once they no longer belong to this world. Once their body becomes a corpse and all that is left behind are memories. As most of us know, massive iconic superstar David Bowie recently passed away. Many remember his existence as he has left behind some amazing music which will stay with us forever. People gathered on the streets to mourn and show respect to the man himself, even though the majority of them never knew him personally. A street full of weeping tears and broken hearts shows just how much one person can have a huge effect on us. This world we live in is run by money and power, but at the end of it all, it all comes down to love and respect.

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn is to love and be loved in return" - **David Bowie**

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[9] Who We Are, *Photography Changes Everything*, **Marvin Heiferman**

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