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Bringing The Struggle Into Focus
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Bringing The Struggle Into Focus

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‘We are people we’re photographers.’ – Duane Michaels

‘I am part of all that I have touched and that has touched me.’ – Thomas Woolfe

This is the basic premise that this paper will follow. I believe that if we are going to become part of the struggle through photographic communication we must examine and realise the undeniable responsibility of all photographers in South Africa to using the medium to establish a democratic Azania. Our photographic seeing is the direct result of the factors that contribute to our being here. Our day to day experiences and our degree of sensitivity to these will determine the area we isolate in our viewfinder, the moment in time that we freeze forever.

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

‘Your child shares in your sense of indignity when you are stopped outside your yard and asked to produce your reference book. Your child shares in your sense of outrage and anger when people arrive in your house in the middle of th[sic!] night and take you away, throw you into jail without trial, and for weeks, even months, refuse your wife the right to see you.

‘As their cars drive off into the night with you, they leave behind the seeds of hatred in the hearts of your small kids.’ – Percy Qoboza

This ‘way of seeing’ referred to in the introduction, holds true for the viewer too. We therefore realize the importance of examining this relationship with our viewers so that they can understand, interpret and perceive the images that we transmit to them in the process of communication. Culture supplies this relationship. To demonstrate this we can compare photographic communication to an iceberg where the tip of the iceberg represents the point and the submerged area the unstated unconscious cultural assumptions that make communications possible. Communication depends on the assumption that photographer and viewer share a common culture.

Photographic communication is possible in our multicultural society because we are united under oppression. The chances of being morally affected by photographs is better than ever before in our struggle because of the level of consciousness and awareness of the people. Evidences of the last drawing together of the laager are so evident that those who don’t see them are those who choose to ignore them!

Because of the high level of awareness and frequent acts of resistance in this country we will regard our culture at this stage in our struggle as a resistance culture. (We will later investigate the relevance of this resistance culture to communication in South Africa).

The poor history of committed photography in South Africa will reflect the refusal of most photographers to accept their responsibility to participate in the struggle.

‘Whether he likes it or not the photographer is in the business of communication and it is useless to retreat into the romanticism of self-expression and technological wizardry. Useless, because to communicate takes us purely beyond personal and technical concerns and into phenomena that the communicator and his audiences share.’ – Frank Webster

This shows the added responsibility of photographers in South Africa as oppression continually stifles the inherent creativity in us. No photographer can lay claim to any individual artistic merit in an oppressed society.

We must realize at this urgent stage of our struggle the importance of making a commitment to change through photographic communication i.e. we’ve got to take sides in the struggle as our commitment becomes very evident in our photographs.

Once we realize the importance of our resistance culture in photographic communication it becomes clear that we must examine the factors responsible for this culture so that we can successfully communicate on a level that the people are perceptive to.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SITUATION

We have already contended that the history of our struggle has moulded our resistance culture from which our present dominant beliefs and attitudes are derived. In order to become more effective in photographic communication we must examine the factors responsible for these beliefs and attitudes.

Factors Contributing To Present Political Awareness:

1. The history of the struggle has never before experienced such frequent acts of resistance. Strikes, guerilla warfare, boycotts and riots have been the experience of all South Africans, if not by direct involvement then by the atmosphere generated by these situations. The intensity of our struggle is proportional to the time it will take to achieve liberation!
2. Mounting economic pressure forces people to evaluate the factors responsible for this pressure. ‘A hungry man is an angry man.’ This is especially true in South Africa where basic commodities needed by the masses for survival are most severely hit by price increases.
3. When Namibia achieves its freedom we will be surrounded by countries whose peoples have successfully struggled for their liberation. We’ve seen the failure of racist regimes, we too shall overcome!
4. The Changed Concept Of Power In South Africa: In any society the culture of that society is strongly influenced by those in positions of power. If power is a strong constituent of culture we notice a peculiarity in our concept of power. Because of our experiences in recent years we see power as our ability to resist oppressive measures, e.g. after June ’76 we recognize the efforts of the authorities to quell resistance not as power but as a

[Abbildung]

weakness. Drastic oppressive measures are blatant admissions of the inability to govern justly!

Through strikes, boycotts, riots and other acts of resistance we realized the power of a united effort, we also learnt to expect the worst from this racist regime and this has served to harden our resolve and make us firm in our struggle.

5. We are also aware of the changing role of religion in South Africa. Church leaders (and we're aware of their influence) are beginning to realize that the oppression we suffer in this country is directly contrary to the teachings of God. This realization has influenced the Church into serving the basic needs of those who are under its influence. Once this is fully realized we will have powerful allies in our persistence for justice.

EFFECTS OF UNIQUENESS ON PHOTOGRAPHIC COMMUNICATION

Once we've understood the present feelings and sensitivities of our intended viewers we can become explicit and direct in our photographic communication and the statements we make will be easily understood.

Lewis Hine, a pioneer in social documentation, said: 'There are two things I wanted to do with the camera, I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected, I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated.' Social documentation can be regarded[sic!] as having two aspects, negative aspects which we can call negative documentation and positive aspects or positive documentation.

Negative Documentation:

This type of documentation is to show the effects of injustice. They show the shocking conditions that people are forced to cope with, they show the faces of those who have given up in the face of overwhelming odds. These images are meant to awaken the sleeping consciences of those who haven't yet realized their oppression and the danger of non-commitment to change. There are those of our brothers who are so blinded by crumbs from the master's table, who even develop a sense of pride over their false securities. Because of the realistic tangibility of photographs they can arrest the conscience of those people and influence them into remedial action.

Positive Documentation:

We can see the danger of negative documentation. We could be seen as a pathetic and hopeless people. Nothing could be more misleading, our struggle has shown resolution, dignity and strength. We've got to show the hope and determination of all committed to freedom.

The photographer must serve the needs of the struggle. He must share the day to day experiences of the struggle. He must share the day to day experiences of the people in order to communicate truthfully. We must be involved in the strikes, riots, boycotts, festivities, church activities and occurrences that affect our day to day living. We must identify with our subjects in order for our viewers to identify with them. Because of the realistic nature of photographs and the relationships built up around the camera and its images they can promote unity, increase awareness and inform. A society possessing these qualities is an easily mobilized one. We as photographers must also be questioning, socially conscious and more aware than our predecessors.

WHAT OF TECHNIQUE?

With technical advances in photography it is within the grasp of most people to produce pictures of good technical quality. Automatic exposures, films with 4-stop latitudes and self-focussing features makes this hardly surprising. The area of technique that is more important is the area we isolate in our viewfinder and how we arrange the content to make our statements readable.

Walker Evans suggests four basic qualities of the committed photographer – basic to the medium of the camera, lens, chemical and paper.

1. Absolute fidelity to the medium itself, that is full and frank utilization of the camera as the great instrument of symbolic actuality that it really is.

2. Complete utilization of natural un-contrived lighting.
3. Rightness in camera view-finding or framing – the operator’s correct and crucial definition of his picture’s border.
4. General but unobtrusive technical mastery.

If we’re going to use images in responsible communication then we need to make these images as strong and impressionable as we can. A slapdash approach to the practice of photography shows no responsibility to the ultimate purpose of the image. While not denying the relevance of technique committed photography must move its allegiance away from the aesthetic to the social functions of photography.

OUTLETS FOR COMMITTED PHOTOGRAPHY

The responsibility of communication does not end at the print, it is then up to the photographer to circulate his work to his intended viewers. What good is documenting if we’re going to hoard these documents in photo archives or display them for liberals in photo galleries. There are other avenues of service for the committed photographer through which he must advertise the struggle.

1. Street exhibitions – in townships and cities.
2. Advertising public meetings, theatre and other acts of resistance; rent increases, bus boycotts.
3. Using responsible media to publish features on events that go unnoticed.
4. Slide shows for community work, highlighting problems that affect the whole community.

We as photographers are responsible for the way in which our pictures are used. Irresponsible cropping, captions and lay-out can distort the intended meaning of single photographs and photo-essays. So much valuable material in South Africa is misused because of irresponsible editing. It is better for the photographer and editorial staff to make collective decisions about the use of photographs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly dealt with the role of culture in photographic communication, the formation of our resistance culture, our country’s uniqueness and how this affects the level of awareness of the people, the relevance of technique and finally outlets for committed photography: An understanding of these topics will enable us to be better equipped for the responsible job of photographic communication in Azania. Two intentions are necessary for committed photography in South Africa:

1. We must be committed in liberation.
2. We must prepare our people for a democratic Azania.