



## Conference Paper

# Social Photography As a Representation Form of Global Challenges at the Turn of the XXth–XXIst Centuries

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## Abstract

The artistic explorations of the late XXth–early XXIst-century mediaculture are, to a large extent, aimed at overcoming stagnant and crisis elements in society, as well as at rethinking the global problem engendered by the increasing levels of alienation and a fear of global transformations. Social photography offers deep and comprehensive critical analysis of the contemporary events. This photographic genre is based on the humanistic approach combined with the individual interpretation of difficult situations. The goal of social photography is to trace the possible solutions for global social problems and to confront cruelty, alienation and violence of our modern world.

**Keywords:** social photography, artistic language of photography, media culture, globalization, global problems

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Received: 22 November 2018

Accepted: 29 November 2018

Published: 23 December 2018

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Facets of Culture in the Age of Social Transition Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

The artistic explorations of the late XXth–early XXIst century are to a large extent determined by the situation of modern society, which has entered the new phase in its development through large-scale informational revolution, the growing urban infrastructure, communication systems, and individual freedoms driving personal opportunities for self-determination. XXth century revealed a lot of crisis point and stagnant areas of culture resulted from the humankind's exploitative and transformational attitude to our world. A plethora of scientific discoveries focusing on deeper understanding of the universe and a quick transformation of reality, revealed a multitude of problems engendered by the imperfect forms and methods of such accelerated rates of research. The previous priorities have changed considerably: today we tend to focus not on the humanity's struggle *with* the world in order to fulfill its needs and potentials – rather, we have to fight *for* the world to preserve it and ensure our own survival.

The difficulty of this struggle is aggravated by its scope and a "... strong interdependence of all subsystems of human civilization; an emergence of integrative structures



permeating all [...] subsystems; development of unified 'spaces': economic, informational, communication, entertainment industry etc." [7, p. 252]. As a result, humanity as a whole become involved in this search for solutions to overcome global problems. "Universal scope of perspectives, opportunities, challenges and threats has made globalization a symbol of our time" [7, p. 34]. However, although global challenges carry a potential threat and danger for humanity, they at the same time acquire the new connotations when we analyze the culture-building processes developing in our society. Thus, systematic and gradual building of awareness about modern global challenges on different levels may become a starting point and an impetus to create the new alternative solutions for various crises facing the modern world.

## 2. The Phenomenon of Mediaculture

Information revolution has brought XXth-century humans into a new type of culture: "... born by the technical progress – mediaculture – a culture of information and replication" [3], "serving as an intermediary between society and the state, socium and power" [3]. According to N.B.Kirillova, "mediaculture may be defined as the sum total of information and communication tools, material and intellectual values, created by humanity throughout its history and facilitating the development of social consciousness and socialization of individuals" [3] Mediaculture as a factor of XXth-XXIst-century informational revolution and technical progress becomes an important tool in transmitting and interpreting modern challenges. Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan highlighted in his works the close links between the humanity's historical progress and the concrete tools we use to interact with the outside world, thus leading to the evolution of culture from its written to the printed form ('Gutenberg Galaxy') and later from printed to electronic forms ('Marconi Galaxy'). When information becomes increasingly mobile and available, but also 'chaotic, unlimited and overabundant' [3], media space changes radically. "Information revolution has radically transformed human and social existence. It compresses time and space, opens borders, allows to create contacts with anyone anywhere in the world, changes the content of many areas of activity... This meta-space becomes simultaneously an environment for intense communication between the new emerging communities, and a universal context for the familiar geographical spaces. A world without borders, where territories and distances lose their previous meaning, begin to shape into a reality" [7, p. 33]. Therefore, humans in the XXth century begin to inhabit a vast informational space created by print media, radio, TV content and Internet resources. The filtering this informational abundance,

its critical assessment and the rational use of multiple data of different kind becomes one of the most relevant and pressing issues of contemporary culture. Photography and cinematography were born in the XIXth century, but they became a foundation of the XXth-century media culture. They make these ideas a reality combining new visual expressive practices and outward simplicity and ease of understanding with the complex internal structure. Social photography offers deep and comprehensive critical analysis of the tendencies underlying the social processes of stagnation, degradation and decline.

### 3. The Role of Topical Social Photography

To understand how exactly the crisis phenomena tend to be presented, we need to define what is a topical social photography. According to V.F.Khil'ko, it is "a genre of... photographic art (between observational photography and aesthetic photography) that reflects social collisions and their problematic content. It is based on photojournalism and documentary photography, with the material that may reach the level of serious artistic generalizations" [6, p. 164]. Based on this definition, we may conclude that social photography provides a unique perspective on a variety of social problems by combining realistic imagery with metaphors and internal aesthetic structure as well as original interpretation of pressing issues. At the same time, an unspoken code of ethics suggests that photographers should exhibit high level of awareness and responsibility for the results of their work towards the humanity as a whole. Today the term 'social photography' is often used as a synonym of reportage or documentary photography, or sometimes photojournalism that combines imaginative and realistic components in its visual narrative.

We have to differentiate between different artistic methods combined under the term of 'social photography' and used to present this or that interpretation of events. Social photography is not a uniform phenomenon based on a strict set of forms and principles of representation. Today social photography increasingly demonstrates the changing tendencies in its visual language. In our new millennium, social photography remains true to its humanistic principles in reflecting the devastating effects of industrial pollution, the growth of urban infrastructure, the injustice of social inequality and alienation. However, these issues are comprehended on completely different levels.

Analyzing contemporary social photography, we may preliminary outline its three leading artistic trends. The first trend is notable for the shift in its visual language to something more rough, scary and off-putting. Unlike the previous century, noted for

its humanistic pathos in representing social and human problems by visual arts, today we see the shift in emphasis. An admiration for high human potential and a deep analysis of human actions and strivings is replaced by the dark side of life, frightening in its unflinching depiction of illness, tragedy and war. Many photographers who choose these forms and methods in their works strike a precarious balance between humanism and cruelty, risking overstepping this line at any moment. A skill required to elevate a frightening image to a level of metaphor and philosophical meditation about life, therefore leading the viewers to the deeper layers of meaning, remains as direly needed as it was in the XXth-century reportage. However, this skill is increasingly rare in contemporary photography.

The second tradition is based on the authors' preference for abstraction and detached observation. A metaphor here not only prevails over the realism – it often replaces it. The authors prefer to use their works not to make the judgmental statements about the reality, but rather to showcase the reality as it is, living the audience with an opportunity to find their own priorities and develop their own interpretation of the photographed events. "The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image," writes Susan Sontag, "is to say: "There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way." Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy [...] the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses." [1]. The closer encounter shows that behind the surface of these works "... lies a global destabilizing phenomenon of the relationships between individual and society, the crisis of an individual's social identity" [7, p. 358]. Being in the epicenter of global changes that involve every area of society, many photographers take an observer's position, reflecting and transmitting information, stripping it of the excessive criticism and trying not to insert their own interpretation between the viewers and the images.

The third trend found when analyzing the visual language of contemporary social photography is a use of quotations (use of the artistic forms and methods of the previous centuries – painting, sculpture, etc.) to 'erase' spatial and temporal limits and highlight universal human values of diverse cultures and historical periods. This method assumes that what is fleeting becomes embedded into the general cultural context unrestricted by spatial and temporal limits, becoming a part of what is atemporal and enduring. This approach uses borrowing, quotation and interpretation – the typical postmodernist approach to reality.

## 4. Conclusions

As we have seen, many contemporary tools of social photography remain contentious. Time is required to determine their significance, effectiveness and cultural value. At the same time, some approaches have already become standard in the world of photography – they occupy their own niches in the range of approaches to the pressing social issues. The author believes that contemporary social photography is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. However, despite its stylistic pluralism, contradictions and oppositions in forms and tools used to transmit visual information, social photography remains, as it did in the XXth century, true to its main objective: to resist violence, unnatural death, alienation and cruelty of modern world.

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