Assignment 3: Critical Essay

Discuss how the conditions of the 'post-photographic era' relate to a particular area or institution of photography
Discuss how the conditions of the 'post-photographic era' relate to photojournalism and documentary photography

Introduction
The conditions of the post-photographic era have had a significant impact on the subject of photojournalism. In order to assess, how and why, the post-photographic condition has affected documentary photography – and professional photographers working in this field – there are four key topics that need to be considered, namely:

- **The post-photographic era**: what is it and how did it come about?
- **Traditional photojournalism**: how do conventional documentary photographers work? Which key characteristics exemplify the discipline and what do traditional conflict photographs all have in common?
- **Impetus for change**: how have recent technological advances altered the industry?
- **Post-photojournalism**: how has photojournalistic practice changed in recent years? What innovative approaches are being adopted and by whom?

By addressing these four key topics, it should be possible to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of post-photojournalism.

The post-photographic era
Since the earliest days of photography, there has been a preoccupation with the idea of truth. William Henry Fox Talbot, in his seminal publication, *The Pencil of Nature*, suggested that:

"One advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to faithfully copy from nature" (Fox Talbot, 1844-1846).

With the advent of digital photography however, these early ideals no longer necessarily hold true.

The digital revolution in photography has brought with it many changes. Camera technology, has evolved over the past 20 years to give us cheaper and faster access to images. Gone is the need for bulky camera equipment, and specialised labs or darkrooms. Photographs can
simply be processed and edited on the home computer, or even in-camera. Many people now carry a camera with them at all times. It is an essential component of the mobile phone in their pocket. The internet – which has co-evolved with the cameras – opens up further opportunities in this new, digital age. Suddenly, photographs are everywhere. They are abundant, easily manipulated, and readily shared. With these changes, the post-photographic era has arrived, and whilst not synonymous with the digital revolution, the two are very closely, if not causally, related.

What then of truth in this new, post-photographic era? Joan Fontcuberta believes that "In post-photography, truth and memory – once fundamental qualities of the camera – are brushed aside in favour of connectivity and communication...Use trumps literalness" (Fontcuberta, 2015, p.6). Interestingly of course, photographs have always been able to lie. Analogue photographs are open to manipulation, just like digital ones. However, the alterations are more quickly and easily achieved via digital technology. What is different now, is that public awareness has changed. The public have become more sceptical and they are less inclined to accept photographs at face value. They know that they can, and do, lie.

It is little wonder then, that one of the greatest changes in the post-photographic era, is to the discipline where the illusion of truth was of fundamental importance; photojournalism and documentary photography. How has the post-photographic condition affected this industry? To answer this question, we need first to consider the nature of traditional photojournalistic practice.

**Traditional photojournalism**

Photojournalists and documentary photographers have long been thought of as objective observers. They bear witness to international events and global atrocities. Perhaps it is also their intent to raise awareness or to solicit change, however, traditional wisdom would have it, that it is not their place to intervene.

Robert Capa once famously remarked that "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough" (Magnum Photos, 2014), which seems to have become the dictum for those that followed him. Conventional war photographs, or at least those that have become part of the public consciousness, all seem to share certain key attributes; they are gruesome, they victimise their subjects and they traumatising their viewers (Ritchin, 2009, p.105). Think
of Don McCullin's 1968 *A young dead north Vietnamese soldier with his possessions* (see figure 1), Nick Ut's 1972 *Napalm Girl* (see figure 2), or Kevin Carter's 1993 *Starving child and vulture* (see figure 3). No doubt, each of these photographs arrested the attention of newspaper readers at the time they were published, however, they also raise questions about exploitation and ethics. Kevin Carter for example, was roundly criticised for not helping the Sudanese toddler that won him the 1994 Pulitzer Prize (Macleod, 2001).

Before the digital revolution, photojournalists, would spend months on commissioned assignments, working on in-depth stories to send back to their editors at home. They could follow a story as it developed, and if their published work was sometimes reduced to a single sensational image, it was not for lack of contextualisation on their part. Editors had their own restrictions and requirements, which were outside of the photographer's control.

From a logistical perspective, photographic equipment was often cumbersome and conspicuous. Rolls of film had to be intermittently sent for developing, so it could be weeks between a photograph being taken and published. Photographers couldn't see their work in progress, so they had to work more intuitively (Ritchin, 2009, p.86), and there was always the risk of film being lost or destroyed. One of Robert Capa's most famous photographs, *D-Day 1944* (see figure 4) narrowly escaped destruction twice, first because Capa did not (like the other photographers present) entrust his film to a clumsy colonel, and second, because it narrowly escaped a processing error, which overheated the film, blurring the image and inadvertently imbuing it with rather more drama (Tramz, 2014).

By considering the logistics of traditional photojournalism, it is obvious that the digital revolution would inevitably have had a significant impact on traditional working practices, and thereby, on the nature of documentary photography itself.

**Impetus for change**

In the post-photographic era, digital technology (in the form of both cameras and the internet) is indispensable. In this new world, photojournalists can edit their photographs in the field (using apps like Hipstamatic) and publish them to social media within minutes of taking them (via platforms such as Instagram and Twitter). In 2012, Benjamin Lowy made history, when his iPhone photograph showing the devastating effects of Hurricane Sandy was published on the front cover of *Time* Magazine (see figure 5).
At first glance, it may appear as though seasoned photojournalists are wholeheartedly embracing this new technology. During the London riots in 2011, photographers quickly changed from using bulky DSLRs to camera phones after seeing some of their number targeted by the rioters (Allan, 2013, p.195-6). Camera phones enabled them to photograph surreptitiously, and therefore more safely, whilst still creating images of a size and format suitable for publication. However, it was not just the photojournalists that were evolving.

In recent years, the public has also become far more cognizant of visual culture. Today, we are constantly bombarded by visual imagery, and we see photographs almost everywhere we turn. We have become a society of visual consumers, curators and editors, as well as image makers. During the London tube bombings in 2005, mobile phone photographs/videos were taken by the victims themselves (see figure 6) and shared online, first on social media, and then by various news outlets worldwide (Sommers, 2015). The citizen journalist was born. What was fascinating about these photographs was that the viewer could so easily relate to them. The mobile phone aesthetic was something that the public were so familiar with, that the images held an innate and indisputable truth. Suddenly, news outlet servers had to be adapted so that they could accommodate the dramatic influx of user generated content (gnovis, 2009).

One major advantage of using the so-called citizen journalist, is that today, there is invariably someone with a camera phone present at whatever newsworthy event needs recording; no matter how unexpectedly it may occur. Furthermore, citizen journalists are popular with the news agencies because they rarely want paying for their work.

These changes, whilst significant enough in their own right, were happening at a time when public dissatisfaction with the both the media and the government was also growing. Professional conflict photographers were being embedded with units of troops – supposedly for their safety – but this effectively placed limits on their movements and exerted control over what they could publish (Ritchin, 2009, p.86). Veteran photojournalist Philip Jones Griffiths, famed for his coverage of the Vietnam war, once described a typical editorial assignment as "we want the photographer to go to X country and illustrate our preconceptions" (cited in Ritchin, 2009, p.92). Today, the only major advantage of having a press pass seems to be that it gives a photographer access to staged photo opportunities, to tableaux, that reinforce the status quo. Of course the status quo can be easily disturbed when
images such as those from Abu Ghraib emerge. In a sense, these images of torture and abuse can be seen as examples of citizen journalism (despite being taken by the abusers themselves), which serve to contradict the official, media-sanctioned story. Consequently, trust in the media is further eroded.

In light of all of these changes, it is little wonder that photojournalism has been forced to adapt. In May 2013, the Chicago Sun-Times famously fired 28 photojournalists, effectively eliminating their whole photography department (Montgomery, 2013). Instead they expected their journalists to supplement their articles with iPhone snapshots, only hiring freelance photographers when absolutely necessary. Such changes are now common across the industry. Staff photographers are disappearing and being replaced by freelancers, and freelancers, are being given fewer, lower-paying, commissions. They need to work over shorter timescales, and are expected to edit and upload their images from the field. The natural consequence of this is that newspaper photographs now lack nuance and depth. And what of truth? Who tells the truth in this post-photographic era? The professional photographer or the citizen journalist?

Post-photojournalism

At this point in time, newspaper photojournalism has irrevocably changed. As newspapers move online, the front page disappears, and serious imagery gets lost amongst the mundane (Ritchin, 2013, p.145-6). Given our current oversaturation of images, photographers need to develop new, unconventional strategies in order to make their work stand out. As such, a number of documentary photographers are now moving away from traditional newspaper assignments and towards other potential outlets, such as gallery exhibitions and installations, self-published photobooks, websites and social media (Allan, 2013, p.196). Sources of funding are also changing, with photographers approaching non-governmental organisations (NGOs), applying for grants and using crowd-sourced funding for their projects. These fundamental changes present photographers with new opportunities; they can work in more creative and more sympathetic ways. If funding permits, they can work on longer narratives of personal interest, providing contextualisation for the viewer. There is also the potential to work with the subjects of a story, treating them with both dignity and respect. This is a far cry from the traditional, somewhat voyeuristic, photojournalistic approach of exploiting the subject in order to create a single, shocking image.
When Patrick Willocq started work on a child refugee project, *The Art of Survival*, for NGO Save the Children, he started by running an internet search for the term "child refugee". Whilst he was not surprised by the results, he was not happy about what he saw either:

"All the images looked alike – people on beaches, children crying, very little humanity. It's as if when a child becomes a refugee they aren't human any more. Instead they have a label on their forehead. I wanted to bring back the humanity and dignity with this project." (cited in McLaren, 2016, p.71).

As a result, Willocq took the innovative approach of working in collaboration with the children living in two different refugee camps, one in Tanzania and the other in the Lebanon. First, he talked with the children, finding out about their hopes and fears, and then he created elaborate theatrical sets in which he placed the children to tell their stories (Lens Culture, no date). The result is a fresh and engaging series of photographs (see for example, *The Mountain Journey - Nyarugusu Camp, Tanzania*; figure 7) that convey a strong sense of empathy.

Alternative, more thoughtful, approaches are becoming increasingly common in the post-photographic era. Photographers such as Richard Mosse and David Birkin, are employing innovative, new techniques in order to communicate with the public. Richard Mosse for example, in his projects *Infra* and *Enclave*, has taken to using colour infrared film in order to document the ongoing conflict in the eastern Congo. His beautiful, psychedelic images (see figure 8) are a visual metaphor; using film that renders the invisible visible, in an attempt to draw attention to an unseen humanitarian crisis. Beauty, may at first seem like the antithesis of conflict photography, but to Mosse "Beauty is one of the main lines to make people feel something. It's the sharpest tool in the box" (Richard Mosse: The Impossible Image, 2013). Similarly, David Birkin has avoided using graphic imagery, whilst addressing themes of war and loss. As he describes it, his work is an attempt "to find a way to articulate loss and the effects of was without recourse to spectacle" (cited in Shore, 2014, p.258). In his 2012 project, *Profiles* (see figure 9), Birkin takes a database number and converts it into a chromatic value, a unique colour representation for individual casualties of the Iraq war.

Where photojournalists were once objective observers they are now artists and storytellers. Documentary photographer Carlos Spottorno, recently teamed up with a news reporter, to create *La grieta* (*The Crack*; figure 10), a photo-comic book that addresses Europe's migration crisis, and more specifically, describes true events happening along the border from
Africa to the Arctic (Spottorno, no date). This graphic novel transcends traditional publishing boundaries, and in doing so, the authors hope that their story will reach a much wider audience (Peces, 2017, p.90).

Interestingly, in this new age of storytelling, it is not just current events that are being tackled. Yang Yi and Cristina De Middel, have photographed future and past events respectively. Yang Yi, told the story of his hometown, destined to be flooded by construction of the Three Gorges Dam in China. In his project *Uprooted* (see figure 11), he photographed his subjects wearing diving goggles, and then added water effects in Photoshop (Shore, 2014, p.234). The results are both poignant and eerie. Cristina De Middel, once a newspaper staff photographer, went even further, when she decided to tell the strange story of the 1960s Zambian space programme in her series, *The Afronauts* (see figure 12). No photographs of this project exist, so De Middel had to produce her own. Her work was extremely controversial at the time that it was published, and it raised a lot of questions about what was and wasn't appropriate in photojournalism (Shore, 2014, p.225). De Middel argued that:

"If you go back to the definition of photojournalism, it's all about telling a story with images, and in this case I'm telling a story that happened in the 1960s. There were no images so I had to create these images", she goes on to say that "In strictly photojournalistic terms, it's been my most successful project because a lot of people have learnt about the Zambian space programme through it" (Shore, 2014, p.242).

Interestingly, major industry bodies have been slow to respond to these kinds of innovative changes. The World Press Photo and Pulitzer Prize awards for example, are still rewarding very traditional imagery (Ritchin, 2013, p.30). Take for example, the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winner for the category *Breaking News Photography* – the Photography Staff of Reuters. They won the award for their photographic series following the cross-country journey of a group of refugees (see figure 13). Clearly, in some industry circles, nothing much has changed. In fact, some of these more innovative approaches, have been rejected from industry awards for not meeting the strict post-processing criteria, as for example, was the case with David Molina Gadea's entry (from his project, *The Long Way Home*) to the World Press Photo competition, which used extreme levels of contrast generated in post-production to create what he considered to be a powerful and emotional aesthetic (Pantall, 2016, p.42).
With the major industry bodies clinging to the idea of truth – as represented by unretouched photographs – what is the future for photojournalism? Who now tells the truth, the traditional photojournalist, the citizen journalist or the post-photojournalist?

Conclusion
Since the mid 1990's, and the digital revolution, photojournalism has evolved. In the post-photographic era, those who were once objective observers are now artists and storytellers. Truth comes in a different package. Whatever the readers personal feelings about post-photojournalism, it is undeniable, that this is a fascinating time for documentary photography. With the oversaturation of images today, photojournalists are having to innovate in order to educate. Stories are being told in new and unusual ways. Whether this tells a viewer more about the subject or the artist is probably debateable, but one thing is certain, the public now have to look harder than ever to discover the truth, and this so-called 'truth', may not always be found in the most obvious or conventional form.
List of Illustrations


Figure 13. Konstantinidis, A. (2015) *The body of an unidentified migrant is seen on a beach after being washed ashore, on the Greek island of Lesvos* At: http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/photography-staff-reuters (Accessed on 15 January 2017)
Bibliography


