

Case study: 'Migrant Mother' by Dorothea Lange, 1936





METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

Describing – Interpreting – Evaluating - Theorizing

“criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art”

- Describing ~ **FORM** ~ What is here? What am I looking at?
- Interpreting ~ **MEANING** ~ What is it about?
- Evaluating ~ **JUDGEMENT** ~ How good is it?
- Theorizing ~ **CONTEXT** ~ Is it art? How does it relate to the history and theory of photography, art and culture?



Vladimirskaya Theotocos,
Mother of God icon, 12th C.

Representation of Mother and Child

An iconic and universal
image



Raphael, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1503



Sebastian Salgado, famine in Africa, 1994



Beslam massacre, 2004

Different ways to analyse a photograph

When analysing a photograph you may want to operate in an **interdisciplinary manner** using a variety of different **analytical methods and approaches**

- Assessed through reference to form, process and technique
- Investigate the intentions of the photographer and the context of its making
- Viewed as a social or historical document
- Related to politics and ideology
- Discussed in relation to class, race and gender
- Considered in terms of aesthetics and traditions of representation of art
- Analysed through reference to psychoanalysis
- Decoded as a semiotic text

Assessed through reference to form, process and technique

- Form...how the subject-matter is presented...how the picture is *formally* composed, arranged and constructed visually...relationship between line, shape, form, colour, texture, light, space, mass, volume.
- Process and technique... what type of film format and type of film she used. What type of camera; was a tripod used or the camera handheld; point of view, which includes the distance from which the photograph was made and the lens that was used: angle and lens; frame and edge; depth of field; sharpness and grain; and degree of focus; exposure value and data on aperture and shutter speed.
- Also description of what processes and techniques she used after the picture was taken; darkroom techniques; cropping, paper and contrast, print quality etc

Investigate the intentions of the photographer and the context of its making

The intention of the photographer and his/her memory of the occasion are in some way assumed to add to our appreciation of the image and our understanding of its significance

- To gain a better understanding of the context of this image it is good practice to investigate the reasons why the photographer took this image, why this particular one was selected from other images of the same kind, and by which criteria.
- But, sixty years on we have to ask ourselves why this should be relevant to our reading of the image now, in different circumstances?
- When interpreting the intentions of the photographer you must look at the image critically and analyse it from your own point of view.
- You can agree/ disagree with the artist's intentions



Look at the 5 other versions of the photographs Dorothea Lange took in the *Migrant Mother* series. They are essentially of the same thing but It is the formal qualities that differentiate them.



Viewed as a social or historical document

Photography as evidence and testament to a specific event or historical moment. One of the central principles of the documentary aesthetic was that a photograph should be untouched, so that its authenticity, its veracity and genuineness might be maintained

- The picture appeals to emotional empathy (a worried mother is shielding her children)
- It shows us destitution of a mother and her children during the Depression era in the 1930s America
- the potential for the image is to transcend its particular location and socio-economic context
- The image reflects a humanitarian notion of universal similarities in the condition of humankind
- It represents a universal symbol of motherhood, poverty and survival

Related to politics and ideology

Photography can be used as a propaganda tool to represent a particular point of view or support a dominant ideology

- Genre and usage...The FSA supplied prints for reproduction in the daily press. The photographers working for the agency were given shooting scripts, and had no control over how their pictures might be cropped, arranged, captioned or used. Their position was similar to a modern day photojournalist working for the commercial press and news media
- Image in context...The FSA project had a clear political purpose in recording statistically the position of the rural poor
- Image-text...the caption 'Migrant Mother', together with the formal organisation of the photograph, are key elements of its appeal. Titles and captions contributes to holding the meaning of pictures, to limiting the potential range of interpretations or responses on the part of the audience or reader. Examination of the relationship between image and text must be taking into account.

Discusses in relation to class, race and gender

Questions of gender have been discussed both in relation to the photographer (a woman) and to the content of the image as a particular representation of maternity

- As gendered image...feminist photo-historians have commented upon Lange's own gender and often referred to her as the 'mother' of documentary photography – being one of the first women to follow this tradition. It has been argued that her gender made her pictures, particularly of other women, more 'compassionate'
- Representations of femininity played a crucial role in the rhetoric of the FSA photographs, both in terms of the gender of the photographer and subject-matter
- Lange's 'Migrant Mother' conforms to the transcendent ideal of mother and child and symbolises a universal concept of motherhood and humanity (a nurturing and caring mother)

Considered in terms of aesthetics and traditions of representation of art

Aesthetics is concerned with what *is* a good work of art, principles of taste and traditional systems of what is deemed beautiful in art.

- Lange's photographs were originally used in books and magazines concerned with representing social conditions, and the focus is upon the implications of the content of the image
- By contrast, when it was exhibited in the art gallery the context invites us to look at the picture in aesthetic and symbolic terms
- For instance, art historians have observed that Lange's photograph related – in terms of both subject-matter and framing – to the many paintings of the Madonna and Child in western art
- The context of where the photograph is being used determines how it functions and operates, and how it is received and understood
- A photograph in a gallery will be compared to other images of the same kind of representation (e.g. paintings, drawings) and this art-historical layer must be taken into account when considering meaning

Analysed through reference to psycho-analysis

Freudian theory based on how the subconscious mind, childhood and trauma influences and shapes human activity, and in relation to photography, the function of the gaze, and personal or psychological issues which are underpinning the work

- Lange's 'Migrant Mother' centres on the female body, the body that is socially constructed through the gaze, and it has the quality 'to be looked at'
- While her two older children turn their heads away from the photographer (out of shame or shyness), and an infant child sleeps, the mother alone remains awake and vigilant. Her arm is upraised, not to support her head but to finger her chin in tentative thought
- Lange builds a narrative around a woman and her three children, centred on the single gesture of an upraised arm
- The picture is created around certain notions of the female body, including the idea of the nurturing mother
- Lange drew on traditional, such as Renaissance depictions of the Virgin and Child, and the close cropping of the image creates within the frame itself a protected, interior, feminised space

Decoded as semiotic text

Roland Barthes (French cultural critic) was a semiotician who investigated how culture signifies, or express meaning, and in his book on photography 'Camera Lucida' he paid particular attention to how photographs signify reality rather than reflecting or representing it

- The dirty clothes, the unwashed hair, the tent etc denote (show) age, hardship, poverty, but connote (suggest, imply) the wall street crash, the tyranny of capitalism, the ongoing divide between the rich and the poor.
- The look on the mother's face may signify, or connote the universal struggle of woman in the face of patriarchy. She looks both noble and destitute (denotation), left to nurture and care for the children after society (male?) has broken down and caused misery (connotation)
- The kids are turned away from the camera (denotation) and signify / suggest misery, tiredness or exhaustion (connotation) on the other hand it may suggest denial, shame or shyness (connotation)