

How photography has changed society



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Photography has shaped society in many ways. It doesn't just serve the purpose of entertainment and enlightenment; it also makes society aware of issues and events the world faces on a daily basis. In this case documentary photography has not just made people all over the globe aware of these issues; it also enforces the power of persuasion upon some to make a difference in society. Photographs create a sense of realism and truth. Words can explain and create a mental picture in the minds of readers or listeners, but images and documentary photographs connect us better with individuals, nationally and even internationally. These photographs have the power to show people the similarities of the human conditions around the world.

The year 1968 in America was a year full of turmoil and political uprising. Thus it was the pivotal year of the sixties, when all of the nation's actions and impulses towards violence, idealism, diversity and inequality peaked to produce the greatest possible hope and at the same time the worst despair. The rest of the world also watched USA and South Africa struggle in the war for peace and freedom. It was a time of social and race inequality. The difference was that in this time of fierce political issues in South Africa, the struggle was known as Apartheid. Apartheid was a time in South Africa where the white citizens were separated from the black citizens. The black people were suppressed and treated as inferior. Thus it was considered a major event of controversy when the photograph of the two black American athletes portraying a silent protest on the podium of the 1968 Olympic Games held in Mexico, appeared in news papers around the world.

OLYMPIC BLACK POWER SALUTE

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The 1968 Olympic Black Power Salute was noted as the most memorable medals ceremony in Olympic history, but also a milestone in America's civil rights movement. The athletes on the podium were Tommie Smith and John Carlos from America and Peter Norman from Australia. The two American sprinters created hype when they engaged in a silent non-violent protest on the podium by bowing their heads and raising their fist wearing a black glove, black socks and a black scarf. These were the signs of the Black Power movement.

The photograph was taken by John Dominis (1921-), who was a photographer for Time & LIFE Magazine at that time. He is famous for taking photographs of historical events and famous people.

This photograph can be clearly stipulated as a documenting photograph as it is a record of the winners of the 200m race for men at the 1968 Olympic Games held in Mexico City. This is a major event and many people watch these games every 4 years. Photographs taken at the Olympic Games may be seen as documentary photography with an entertainment basis, thus highlighting the athlete's actions and achievements. But this photograph taken by Dominis portrays political controversy. This photograph has significant semeiotic value to that era.

A friend of Smith and sociologist, Harry Edwards, suggested that all black American athletes should boycott the Games in hoping to bring attention to the fact that the civil rights movement in America had not gone far enough to eliminate the injustices black Americans were facing. Edwards also

created a group the Olympic Project for Human rights (OPHR) to elevate this boycott around the world, but the boycott never materialized.

The two American athletes wore various black garments signifying different aspects of the black community. Smith and Carlos both wore black gloves. Smith held his right fist up, representing Black power while Carlos' left fist which represented unity. Together they formed the arch of unity and power. Smith also wore a black scarf around his neck, which stood for black pride, while his black socks and no shoes represented black poverty in racist America.

The action of these athletes, created such an outrage that they were suspended from the American National team and sent home during the games. The Olympic Games has an anti-political policy, so the event officials and team officials referred to this account as a disgrace not to only fellow team members, but to America. The supporters who saw the photograph responded differently. This photograph moved so many supporters, that the athletes were praised for their bravery. Thus this photograph has raised awareness of social inequality in America and many people around the world joined the group OPHR. This photo could also have created hope in South Africa, as the black citizens in South Africa suffered the same inequality and suppression. It created a sense of hope seeing people fighting for their rights and influencing people around the world to join the fight for injustice.

According to Liz Wells, photography has established itself as more as just a form of art; it can be placed within humanities which can raise sociological, moral as well as historical questions. This photograph has done just that, it

has not just made people around the world aware of humanitarian issues; it also raised awareness of fighting against it.

This photograph has also enhanced the ways people perceive the world. Ossip Brink stated in what the eye does not see that “ then we will see our concrete reality”. This allowed society to see more than just the picture, those signs portrayed by the two athletes also created a sense of reality of that time, thus semiotic ally showing the world the political, racial and social conflicts in society. In South Africa people might have read about the similarities the Black Americans are enduring, but pictures create a sense of truth and realness, that words cannot create. It was assured by Roland Barthes: ‘ Language cannot give... this certainty; it cannot authenticate itself whereas photography is an “ authentication itself”. Although there is nothing better to confirm reality, it is a contingent reality...’

CONCLUSION

At the time this photograph was splashed all over the news paper across the world, it created unity for black people as they could relate to the struggles in society. Today, most of those issues have been so to say solved, South Africa became a democracy and America’s citizens have equal rights. It doesn’t mean racism and inequality has disintegrated in society totally. But this photograph educates the younger generations on how society functioned in that era. And older generations can look at that photograph and remember that time of all those injustice placed upon nations.

That photograph can still influence society that when looked at, it must persuade people not to go back to that era and want equality for every race

on this planet. This documenting photo has evolved amongst various genres' starting off as a political photograph and ending in a social photograph that influences and teaches society about the wrongs and rights in the world. This creates a sense of proof and a recording so that future generations can learn from the world mistakes made in the past. This photograph isn't about the issues of that time anymore, it is about the fact that it happened. As quoted by Susan Sontag: " A photograph posses the incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened." (Sontag, 1975: 5)

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