


Assessment of the Bachelor's Thesis

Author of thesis: River Young

Title of thesis: The integration of 'self' in social documentary art works

Assessment of the primary advisor 

Assessment of the opponent 

Author of the assessment (first name, last name, workplace): Tereza Stejskalová, FAMU

Evaluation of the content and final form of the thesis (A/excellent – B/very good – C/good – D/good with objections – E/satisfactory – F/unsatisfactory – not recommended for defence)

Suitability of the selected objective and work approach A

Relative completeness of the literature used for the selected topic A/B

Ability to critically evaluate and use professional literature A

Logicity of the thesis structure, connection of its chapters A

Language and stylistic level of the thesis B

Compliance with citation norms (should the text repeatedly contain adopted passages without citing the source, the work cannot be recommended for defence) A

Sufficient extent of image attachments, justifiability and suitability of attachments, graphic layout B/C

Originality of the thesis, contribution to the development of the field of study A

Overall evaluation of the thesis A

Verbal evaluation of the thesis including questions that the diplomate must address in his/her thesis defence:

River Young's well-structured and well-written thesis deals with the relevancy of social documentary photography at present. He begins by exploring the tradition of the genre through the canonical works of Lewis Hine (1874-1940) and Gordon Parks (1912 - 2006). Young describes how Hines' photographs depicted the socially invisible suffering of children working in factories and led to actual social change - stricter legislation related to child labor. On the other hand, the photographs of Parks depicted everyday activities of African Americans living in the rural South under Jim Crow laws. As their everyday concerns were not so different from the rest of the population, the absurdity of their status as second-class citizens was revealed. Young notices the difference between Hine, an outsider who sneaked into a territory he was not meant to enter, and Parks, who, as an African American, was - to an extent - an insider to a community he depicted. The thesis then deals with the criticism of Martha Rosler who in the eighties criticized "liberal" documentary of exploiting the oppressed populations in Bowery neighborhood in New York City. She argued that the intention to help "the other" by revealing her/his misery no longer works but only exploits "the other" in order to make money and improve one's social status. Importantly, liberal documentary does not tackle the situation (i.e., capitalism) that produced that misery - it does

not deal with the crux of the problem. "The integration of self" is then introduced as a way that social documentary can be still relevant today as it does not rely on the exploitation of "the other". We are introduced to the work by two contemporary artists - Latoya Ruby Frazier (1982) and Sophie Calle (1953). Frazier used the portraits of female members of her own family to speak about the deterioration of an American Rust Belt town through deindustrialization and the associated problems of segregation, poverty, pollution. For her project Hotel (1980) Calle got herself a job of a hotel maid. Tackling issues of surveillance and of the unstable boundary between private and public, her photographs of the hotel rooms are made by both - the participant and the observer. Young concludes:" By integrating themselves both artists approach the viewer in a unique way that allows for deeper understanding of the issue depicted (28)."

Problems and questions:

Is strikes one that both of the examples that the author has chosen for demonstrating how social documentary may remain relevant today come from contemporary art. In other words, they would rather be considered as works by contemporary visual artists more than social documentary photographers. What does it say of the social documentary photography as a genre and institution? Does it still make sense to discuss social documentary photography?

The author relies much on Rosler's notion of radical documentary - more politically relevant. It is implied that the work by Calle and Frazier are examples of it. The notion is, however, insufficiently defined. In the thesis we learn that it addresses the abuses of the society (29). How can one better understand radical documentary and in what ways do Calle's and Frazier's photographs fit the definition? In what ways they challenge it?

The thesis suggests that Gordon Park's observational method cannot be separated from the fact that he was a member of community whose life he depicted. Could his work be an early example of the "integration of self" in social documentary photography?

While the works of Hine and Parks were published in mainstream media (in fact, this is how they entered the canon), this cannot be claimed of the work by Calle and Frazier - their works are shown mainly in cultural institutions with a specific audience. How is it related to their status as contemporary artists (rather than social documentary photographers)? Is it necessary today for a work of art in order to have a wider circulation to sacrifice its radicality both in terms of politics and aesthetics?