

**Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague**  
**Department of Photography**

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**Assessment of the Bachelor's Thesis**

Author of thesis: River Young

Title of thesis: INTEGRATION OF SELF IN SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY WORKS

Assessment of the primary advisor ✕

Assessment of the opponent ✓

Author of the assessment (first name, last name, workplace): Michal Šimůnek,  
Department of Photography, 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.....B  
Ability to critically evaluate and use scholarly literature.....A  
Logicity of the thesis structure, connection of its chapters and theirs  
proportionality.....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  
Originality of the thesis, contribution to the development of the field of study.....B  
  
Overall evaluation of the thesis.....A

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

The thesis of River Young deals with social documentary photography, it focuses on its  
contemporary crisis (of its definition and purpose) and on critical, politically and socially  
engaged, innovative and experimental approaches to documentary photography. The thesis is  
written in a readable academic style; its structure is logical. I appreciate particularly well-  
formulated links between the chapters: the end of each chapter is written as an exposition of  
arguments developed in the following one.

The first chapter focuses on the definition of social photography, and it also mentions some  
classic examples of those documentary works, which had a direct impact on documented  
subjects, which targeted particular social problems and led to social improvements and  
change (Lewis Hine, Gordon Parks).

In the second chapter, Young presents Martha Rosler's famous early 1980's critic of the liberal documentary. This chapter is mostly an extended résumé of Rosler's paper *In Around and Afterthoughts*, but its argumentation is also appropriately extended by references to other critics and concepts (e.g. Susan Sontag's critique of the aestheticisation/beautification of reality through photography and desensitisation of the public).

The most original is the third chapter in which Young attempts to identify a new category of radical documentary photography: photography "integrating oneself [photographer] into the documentary". I highly appreciate Young's courage to take up this kind of conceptual work. It has to be said that by focusing on documentary projects trying to question and revision subject-object (photographer/photographed) relation he is heading in the right direction towards "radical documentary". But the subject/object relation has broader and deeper epistemological, methodological and ethical implications which are hard to address and which deserve to be carefully thought out. Below, I summon up some of my comments, by which I do not mean to point out errors, shortcoming or misunderstandings, but instead offer some recommendations on how to think-out the proposed category more thoroughly:

- Young defines the "integration of self" photography as "photographing oneself in an event or situation pertaining to an issue, or topic addressed or by building a project around oneself using photography" (p. 11). In this respect, he recalls ethnographic participant observation principles (p. 23) as an example of this kind of integration. It is a good attempt. However, it is, in my view, based on "too literal" reading of the relationship between researcher and subject in ethnography. Ethnography traditionally distinguishes itself from positivistic science, particularly using the dichotomy of emic and etic description (emic understanding from the perspective of those who are researched vs etic superior explanations of a researcher). The relation between emic and etic is complex, but we can say that ethnographic ideal is to be as much emic as possible. This is why the most important research tool for collecting data in ethnography are body, senses and mind of an ethnographer. But it does not mean that ethnographer "integrates her/his self" in investigated culture. An emic description is rather reached by constant reflexivity of the relation between ethnographer and his subjects. Any kind of integration is considered to be "methodologically" risky because it could lead to so-called home blindness (a failure to observe essential features of society because one takes it for granted):

- The "integration of self" has to be defined more precisely. Does it mean, that a photographer let somebody else photograph her/him? Does it mean, that a photographer is just an initiator of picture taking like it is, e.g. in photo-voice projects? Or does it mean that a photographer is just emotionally and intellectually engaged in the social problem he/she addresses?

- When proposing a new category, it should be clearly stated what are the similarities and differences if compared to other related conceptions. In this sense consider, e.g. collaborative photography, civic photojournalism, photo-elicitation and photo-voice techniques, auto-ethnographic accounts, (auto)therapeutical use of photographs (Diana Arbus, Nan Goldin) etc.

- When thinking about challenges and opportunities for contemporary documentary genres, it should be paid more attention to the consequences of a "new media situation": over-saturation of visual culture, opportunities brought by user-generated content platforms, the role of interactivity, crowdsourcing, self-documentation, new possibilities of participation etc. (see e.g., Kate Nash, Craig Hight, Catherine Summerhayes (eds.). 2014. *New Documentary Ecologies*. Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses.).

- When giving examples of a new category, it should be clearly described in what sense these examples fit (or do not fit) into the category (see my questions for the defence). Btw. The scope and range of "radical documentary" photography projects are really large: consider, e.g. Seba Kurtis' projects "Drowned" and "Heartbeat" or "new mixtures" (Mette Sandbye. 2018. *New Mixtures*. Photographies, 11:2-3, 267-287.) photo-documentaries of Kent Klich (Gaza Works) and Tina Enghoff (Migrant Documents)

Despite upper mentioned comments, I appreciate Young's attempt to identify and conceptualise a new category of documentary photography – particularly when taking into account the type (bachelor) of the thesis. I also consider Young's way of thinking about documentary photography, the way he can ask relevant questions and his knowledge

regarding the crisis of documentary photography and contemporary revisionist projects as very good. I recommend his thesis for the defence and propose A as the final grade.

Questions for the defence:

Could you compare two Sophie Calle's projects (The Detective, Suite vénitienne) and consider, how do they fit (or do not fit) into the category of photography integrating a photographer? I recommend you to read Jean Baudrillard's paper "Please follow me" (afterword in Calle's book Suite vénitienne), in which he considers ambiguity and reciprocity of the relationship between a follower and followed, spy and spied, photographer and photographed.

What if I try to argue that excellent examples of "integration of the self into photography" are self-portraits, selfies and, e.g. popular youtube time-lapse photographs/videos (see, e.g. Noah takes a photo of himself every day for six years - see <https://youtu.be/6B26asyGKDo>). Would you agree with that?

Date: 10/06/2019

Signature:.....