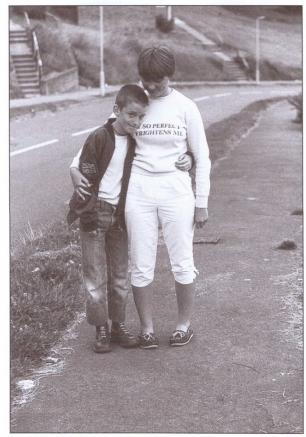The Role of Documentary Photography in British Working Class Experience
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Painting and Printmaking

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(Wordcount 10,924)

So Perfect It Frightens Me

Fig.1 Gavin Watson 'So perfect it frightens me' 1994, 'Skins' (London: John Blake Publishing 2016) pg.84

Synopsis

This dissertation examines the role of the documentary photographer within British culture in the context of the working class 'experience' post war until the present. It draws upon the writings of Martha Rosler, along with cultural studies from Stuart Hall, and asks, through a series of reflections upon photographic studies, exhibitions and films, is there legibility in this medium to portray authentic experience? For instance, what are the implications of this in relation to identity formation and working class 'culture' in contemporary British society? Photographic theory from Roland Barthes and Vilem Flusser throughout assesses photography's limitations. Chapter 1 presents a review of the present, dominant cultural investment into post war photography in two photographers, developed in the writings of Paolo Jedlowski's 'collective memory' and Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'Community of sentiment'. Chapter 2 examines identity formation and reconstruction within subcultural photography during the 1980s and subsequent popular culture to investigate the problematic appropriation of subcultural theories and 'parent culture'. Chapter 3 focuses on the 1990s and the concept of the 'under class' in reference to urban spatial theorists and how this is socio-politically framed for political convenience in Richard Billingham's work. Further work associated with this derogatory concept brings this essay to a conclusion that a current identity crisis within the working class image creates difficult conditions for class based identification in British culture while dominant images need to be revised in an attempt to grasp authenticity within the working class experience.

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