Art Comparative Study

This comparative study examines links between three artworks from three different cultures and time periods: Ai Weiwei’s “Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn”, Jake and Dinos Chapman’s “The Sum of all Evil”, and Robert Capa’s “Death of a loyalist militiaman”. The main theme explored throughout these pieces is “shock”. 
Analysis of ”Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn” by Ai Weiwei (艾未未)

This piece is a photographic triptych by Ai Weiwei showing him dropping an urn from the Han-Dynasty. Such an urn is clearly recognizable when looking at this piece and greatly juxtaposes with the plain street setting. It seems very much out of place. In addition, the scruffiness and simplicity of Ai Weiwei’s clothes contradicts the impressive and ancient urn which also helps to draw the focus to the actions in the photographs. The fact that Ai Weiwei is dropping such a valuable urn can be seen as quite devastating as the ancient artifact is irreplaceable. It can suggest Ai Weiwei is trying to show that areas such as freedom and rights are more important than conserving Chinese tradition.

The series of images is in black and white which contrasts with the harshness of the actions depicted, this use of monochrome colours can help to reinforce the seriousness of the action as well as the power behind it. Looking closely at Ai’s face, it seems to show no emotion. His unmoved face juxtaposes completely with his actions of breaking the artifact which helps to create a strong atmosphere of shock.
Applying McFee King’s conceptual framework to Ai Weiwei

**Artist**
- Ai Weiwei is a cultural figure of international renown, he is one of China’s best artists and one of its highest profile government critics (BBC, 2012). He does not see himself as a dissident artist, instead he sees the Chinese government as a “dissident government!” (Gotthardt, Alexa).
- Ai Weiwei wanted to create a provocative series of images that represented his questioning attitude towards Chinese cultural values and its society (The Telegraph). He wanted to create anger and shock throughout the piece to really engage and captivate his audience.

**Artist’s World**
- Ai Weiwei is a contemporary Chinese artist and political activist. He attended the Beijing Film Academy and studied animation. Ai Weiwei later went on to become one of the founding members of a groups called “The Stars”. This group favoured individualism and freedom of expression in their works, they made history in 1979 when they defied the Chinese government and launched their own unofficial exhibition. When officials shut down the exhibition the group staged protests that became a rallying point for cultural openness in China (Gotthardt, Alexa).
- During the 1990’s, Ai Weiwei was an Art student in New York. A time and place where the more anti-authoritarian and oppositional, the better. Soon after he returned to China where people were far less open to these views (Falconer, Morgan).

**Audience**
- Ai Weiwei is a highly controversial artist who documents the everyday social realities in China which bring about feelings of shock, anger and sympathy to his audience.
- Ai presents to a global audience who are captivated by his engagement in sociopolitical issues through his works (Warsh, 2016).

**Audience’s World**
- “Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn” was completed in 1995 as a part of Ai’s exhibition “Interlacing”. This was Ai Weiwei’s first ever major exhibition.
- This was almost 30 years post Cultural revolution, and was a time period where artists still struggled for the freedom of expression. They still struggle now.

**1995**
Significance of "Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn" by Ai Weiwei (艾未未)

• This piece by Ai Weiwei is quite significant in terms of social, historical and political contexts. Ai has been known to challenge the Chinese government's idealism and with this piece he is doing exactly this.

**Social significance:** Ai Weiwei is breaking barriers here by defying a government that takes a conservative standpoint when it comes to freedom of expression. The artwork reflects aspects of the world during the time it was created as it is a representation of how artists are trying to break free from the control of the Chinese government.

**Historical significance:** The urn being broken is extremely valuable and can have a value of up to $1 million US dollars (McKirdy, 2014). Ai Weiwei is removing this artifact from existence, it is almost as if he is removing history which can reflect on his attitude to Chinese tradition and policy.

**Political significance:** Ai Weiwei is suggesting ideas of political rebellion and threat which can be seen as significant as the Chinese government are so obsessed with the control of the country. Many of Ai’s works are just as powerful and provocative as this. His constant stance against the government lead to his arrest in 2011 following a crack down on “political dissidents”, the government told the public he was charged for “economic crimes” (McMahon, JP). His arrest really reveals the stringency of the Chinese government and the risks artists such as Ai Weiwei take when creating such works.

**Personal significance:** This piece can also reflect on Ai Weiwei’s personal struggle within art as to some extent during the cultural revolution, art was almost completely eradicated. This piece completely defies the government which is a dangerous position to take up for Ai Weiwei.

• Exploring Ai Weiwei has influenced my work in a sense that I would like to incorporate the theme of shock into my works as well as giving my works an underlying message, it could even be political, something that we have seen a lot of in his works
"The Sum of all Evil" by Jake and Dinos Chapman is a series of four diorama installations. The work features a mass number of detailed modelled Nazi soldiers, as well as characters from the fast food chain McDonald's, committing violent, offensive acts such as murder and crucifixion set in an apocalyptic landscape. The overall effect of fusing sensitive events i.e. The holocaust, with mass branding and symbols of the fast food chain, McDonald's, can provoke feelings of unease and controversy surrounding moral taboos. Are the brothers to some extent mocking these events?

To create this piece the brothers first constructed the rugged landscape, they used dark somber colours to create a disturbing atmosphere. They then filled these landscapes with thousands of miniature figures. In this piece, the Chapman brothers create shock through the overwhelming number of characters committing violent acts. People may associate the characters of McDonald's with joy and innocence, here the brothers completely contrast this by placing them in an incredibly frenzied apocalyptic environment. This creates quite an impact on the audience, something that is further emphasized by the sheer detail of the individual characters. It brings a sense of realism to the art. This sense of realism is also brought about by the use of colours for every miniature character, these colours add to the overall goriness of the work.
Applying McFee King’s conceptual framework to Jake and Dinos Chapman

**Audience**
- The works of the Chapman brothers tend to place their audience in discomfort and shock. Their works are known to be explicit and bold.
- When audiences view the works of the brothers, they expect disturbing offensive works.

**Audience’s World**
- “The Sum of all Evil” was released in the White Cube gallery in Hong Kong in 2013, subsequently it was exhibited in Britain. In both these places artistic freedom is celebrated and therefore it takes something truly shocking to be classified as controversial.
- It was created at a time where people seem to live in a consumerist and materialistic society (Barabas, 2013).

**Artist**
- Through their works, the Chapman brothers explore the areas of beauty and pain, humor and horror, the sublime and the perverse, the diabolical and the infantile (Gotthardt, “Jake and Dinos Chapman”), to confront their audience with shock horror.
- Jake and Dinos describe their work as a way of establishing “how and whether we are allowed, or able, to show moral views, this exhibition addresses this as it is highly confrontational and culturally disturbing (White Cube, 2013).
- “The Sum of all Evil” was inspired by the actions that took place in the holocaust as well as the brothers views on McDonald’s. The two see McDonald’s as the benchmark for everything wrong with modern society, Jake Chapman said that “McDonald’s once represented the idealism of fast food and the space rest era. Now it’s consistent with the dilation of the ozone and a litigious clown who’s lost his sense of humor” (Barabas, 2013). This lead them to creating a mass crucifixion of Ronald McDonald.

**Artist’s World**
- Jake and Dinos Chapman are British visual artists. They create iconoclastic sculptures, installations and prints that look into modern politics, morality and religion (Gotthardt, “Jake and Dinos Chapman”)
- The two brothers studied at the Royal College of art in London, they began collaborating in 1991. Much of their works show disfigurement and abuse (Vallely, 2000).
Significance of “The Sum of all Evil” by Jake and Dinos Chapman

- The context of “The Sum of all Evil” is quite significant as it provokes an uncomfortable controversy surrounding moral taboos (Lohmann, 2013) around areas such as the holocaust as well as areas such as a modern day material obsessed society. The brothers convey this through their explicit and vulgar works that although may seem magnified, clearly shows the reality of their opinions on historical and social phenomena. This reflects on aspects of the world at the time it was created.
- The symbol of the destroyed and burnt out McDonald’s restaurants as well as the murder of hundreds of McDonald’s characters appears to be a relic of contemporary consumerism, a reminder of its once extensive global presence (White Cube, 2013). It could be representing that if society continues the way it is, it will burn out.
- Having seen the work of the Chapman brothers and its implications, what I would like to use is their method of creating an explicit message. Something clear and upfront. I have also been influenced by their use of installation, in future I would like to try and create my own installation.
Analysis of “Death of a loyalist militiaman” by Robert Capa

“Death of a loyalist militiaman” is a black and white photograph taken by Robert Capa on the Córdoba front in Spain showing the moment a Spanish loyalist militiaman was shot. The monochrome colours of black and white suggest that this picture is factual and depicts the truth, you cannot argue with black and white.

The victim in the image seems very removed from the rest of the world, this is further emphasized by the plain and empty background of the sky and mountains. It perfectly sums up the impact of death and the silence it brings thus creating an atmosphere of shock.

To some extent it could be said that the image is also almost peaceful, the expression on the soldiers face seems to be of relief. This could reflect on the severity and power of war, people just want to remove themselves from it. When looking at the image, one may get the feeling of being “frozen in time”, it all seems like it is in slow motion (Castano).
Applying McFee King’s conceptual framework to Robert Capa

**Audience**
- “Death of a loyalist militiaman” has been published in newspapers as well as being exhibited in galleries.
- When people view works by Robert Capa they expect images of war and death.
- Robert Capa has an international reputation of being the “Greatest War Photographer in the World”.
- There have been accusations of Robert Capa’s photograph “Death of a loyalist militiaman” being a staged photograph like many war photographs at the time (Selwyn-Holmes, 2009). However, Robert Capa has always denied these allegations.

**Artist**
- In 1936, Capa made his way to the Córdoba front in Spain where he photographed the militiaman in action. “Death of a loyalist militiaman” was said to be taken whilst Capa was in a trench with the camera poking out of the trench above his head as bullets were being fired (Selwyn-Holmes, 2009).
- “Death of a loyalist militiaman” has become an emblem of photography’s unrivaled capacity to depict sudden death (The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

**Audience’s World**
- “Death of a loyalist militiaman” was taken in 1936 on the Córdoba front in Spain.
- It was photographed at the height of the Spanish civil war.
- The photograph was first published in the French magazine “Vu” and was later used by Life Magazine as a symbol of the Spanish conflict (Rare Historical Photos, 2014).

**Artist’s World**
- Born in 1913, Robert Capa studied political science at the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik in Berlin. Capa was then driven out of the country by the threat of a Nazi regime, he moved to Paris in 1933 (Magnum Photos).
- He worked as a photojournalist documenting the Spanish civil war before becoming a freelance photographer for LIFE and Time magazine in America (International Center of Photography).
"Death of a loyalist militiaman" by Robert Capa is significant as it depicted the violence of war and emphasized the shocking impact of death at a time when it was actually happening. It was an important documentation.

The photograph also reflects on the true power photography as a medium and its unrivaled capacity to depict death (The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Although the scene being depicted in this image is of an event that is now distanced, the image still easily conveys the powerful impact of war. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). This may be because the picture seems to have no identity in the sense that the background is of the sky and plain hills.

Looking at the type of photography that Capa creates, I would like to use his ideas of creating impact on an audience to reveal the harshness and reality of the world.
Comparison of “Dropping a Han-Dynasty urn”, “The Sum of all Evil”, and “Death of a loyalist militiaman”

- **Photographic Triptych**
  - “Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn” by Ai Weiwei

- **Photographic medium**
  - “Death of a loyalist militiaman” by Robert Capa

- **Monochrome colours**
  - “The Sum of all Evil” by Jake and Dinos Chapman

- **Simple/plain backgrounds**

- **Created in the 20th century**

- **Created in the 21st century**

- **Simple clothing**

- **Use of ceramics**

- **Installation/Sculpture**

- **Installation**

- **Contemporary**

- **Feeling of shock**

- **Chaos**

- **Themes of war**

- **Depicts death**

- **Artwork composed of small individual designs**

- **Ideas of the holocaust**

- **Mass number of detailed figures. These figures are Nazis and McDonald’s characters**

- **Created by highly controversial artists**

- **Ideas of defying the government and breaking tradition**

- **The picture seems very “in the moment”**

- **Themes of identity**

- **Historical**

- **Documentary**

- **Depicts death**

- **Historical Documentary**

- **Chaos**

- **Contemporary**

- **Ideas of defying the government and breaking tradition**

- **Depicts death**

- **Themes of war**

- **Artwork composed of small individual designs**
Similarities between “Dropping a Han-Dynasty urn”, “The Sum of all Evil”, and “Death of a loyalist militiaman”

It is clear that these three artists have all created a feeling of shock throughout their works. In the “Sum of All Evil” this is achieved through the extremely gory and explicit themes. Jake and Dinos Chapman really do not shy away from depicting such a violent and realistic scene. Similar to this, Capa’s work captures death in the moment which really has a strong impact on the audience. Ai Weiwei also creates shock, he does this through his harsh actions of breaking a very valuable Han-dynasty urn. The breakage of such an artifact can be seen as rebellious and unexplainable.

“Breaking a Han-Dynasty Urn” and “Death of a loyalist militiaman” are very similar in the sense that they are both photographs. Likewise, both of these works have been presented in monochrome colours which helps to draw the focus of both pieces to the actions in the images. Not only this but both also have very plain simple backgrounds. Ai Weiwei’s background is merely a brick wall and Capa’s is the sky with a grass field. The basic backgrounds again help to reinforce the harshness of the actions depicted.

One similar feature in all three of these works is the use of outstretched arms to create a feeling of helplessness. The use of outstretched arms in Ai Weiwei’s work suggests to us that there is no hope. This could have political connotations as he is continuously trying to make change. In the Chapman Brothers work, we see that the outstretched arms depict a crucifixion which evokes feelings of vulnerability and again helplessness. Within Robert Capa’s work, the helplessness is also tied with death as the flaying arms show the figure is no longer in control.

Jake and Dinos Chapman have heavily incorporated themes of war into their piece “The Sum of All Evil”. This is evident through the use of Nazi figurines harming McDonald characters and the ideas of the holocaust throughout the piece. These themes of war are also prevalent in Capa’s piece as his photograph shows a loyalist militiaman being shot whilst fighting in the Spanish civil war.
Differences between “Dropping a Han-Dynasty urn”, “The Sum of all Evil”, and “Death of a loyalist militiaman”

Jake and Dinos Chapman are the only artists here who use a wide range of colours. These colours range from dark greys to bright yellows and purples adding to the gore and branding of McDonalds. This is very much in contrast to the monochrome colours used in both Ai Weiwei and Robert Capa’s works. The black and white colours instead add to the historical context, these colours also suggest the truth.

Although Robert Capa and Ai Weiwei’s work are similar in that they are both photographs, the difference is that Robert Capa’s is more of a documentary on history whereas Ai Weiwei’s is an installation. In Robert Capa’s, characterization is brought about by the historical context. With this piece came allegations of it being staged as a dramatic scenario. On the other hand, Ai Weiwei’s is characterized by the calmness and purpose of his actions.

Whilst Robert Capa’s work is a historical photograph, The Chapman Brothers and Ai Weiwei’s works are contemporary. Robert Capa’s work creates shock because of the harsh reality of the picture whereas the Chapman Brothers and Ai Weiwei have created shocking images and installations through symbolism and controlled actions.
Significance of Ai Weiwei’s “Dropping a Han-Dynasty urn” to my own work

Main Thematic Influence: Shock
Other Significant Influences: Use of ceramic materials and ancient artifacts, creating a controversial message

“Dropping a Han-Dynasty Urn” by Ai Weiwei (shown above) has really influenced me to explore the theme of shock. Ai Weiwei creates shock here through the destruction of an extremely valuable Han-Dynasty Urn which completely juxtaposes with his emotionless expression. My work (shown on the right) explore themes of the one child policy and abortion in China. Due to the previous one child policy, when having children, Chinese families preferred to have males rather than females. This was because males would be able to carry on the family name, however, this meant that if a Chinese mother knew their child would be a girl, they would normally get an abortion. From this, hundreds of thousands of female babies were aborted. The terracotta warrior in my work represents the males that were not aborted as all terracotta warriors are male, on this there are images printed onto it, these are news headlines and propaganda posters on the one child policy and abortion. The statue has been placed on top of plaster containing parts of baby dolls which represent the dead aborted female babies. This has brought about shock as the base made from baby parts is extremely unexpected and grotesque. Other significant influences are the use of ceramic materials, Ai Weiwei uses an Urn, I used a terracotta warrior. Furthermore my work also touches upon sensitive controversial topics, very similar to Ai Weiwei.
Significance of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s “The Sum of all Evil” to my own work

Main Thematic Influence: Shock
Other Significant Influences: Portrayal of death with grotesque themes, relation to real life events, installation

“The Sum of all Evil” by Jake and Dinos Chapman is a shocking piece of work that depicts the murder of thousands of miniature figurines. This theme of shock has influenced my own work a great deal. In my work (two top right images) I have created shock by forming a life-sized body installation that represents the victims of the Mount Vesuvius eruption. The victims of this disaster were covered in ash and as a result were stuck in the position they died in. My life-sized body was formed in a position that made it looked like it was dying, it was then covered in real ashes and photographed. Another significant influence is the portrayal of death, the portrayal of death in my work is very similar to the that of “The Sum of all Evil” in that there is no censorship and the themes of the works are both very grotesque, not only this but both pieces of work here are installations. It is also clear that the theme of death in “The Sum of all Evil” and my own work is omnipresent. The portrayal of death makes the audience feel uncomfortable. The hand of my figure reaching out and the smell of the ash also makes the struggle very real and present. Furthermore, whilst “The Sum of all Evil” is based off events from the holocaust, my work is also based off a real life disaster (the eruption of Mount Vesuvius).
Significance of Robert Capa’s “Death of a loyalist militiaman” to my own work

Main Thematic Influence: Shock

Other Significant Influences: Capturing death in the moment, a documentary on real life events, photography

The theme of shock in Robert Capa’s work is created through the violent nature of his photograph of a militiaman being shot. This significant influence is carried on in my photographic series/installation based on North-American police brutality. Here I create shock through the grotesque and realistic nature captured in my figurines. Whilst Robert Capa captures the death of a militiaman, I attempt to capture the moment an African-American man is attacked by the police. Another link here is that both photographs are a documentary on real life events. Robert Capa’s is the Spanish Civil War whilst mine are the countless unprovoked attacks by police on African-Americans. Furthermore, due to the allegations of Robert Capa’s “Death of a loyalist militiaman” being staged, another link could be that both capture death artificially. My work has been made up of mannequins whilst Robert Capa’s militiaman could be an actor pretending to get shot.