The identity of photography: Exploring realism and the nature of photography in photojournalism

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Abstract

It can be argued that the nature of photography becomes drastically altered, and its identity changes according to the uses it is put to. This article will discuss the many aspects of photojournalism that shape and manipulate the current status of photography. Its origin as a means of objective documentation will be critically analysed in relation to its uses in war photography, political agendas and propaganda. The theories of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, among others, will be drawn on to evaluate the extent to which photography is autonomous, changing and transforming depending on how it is employed. The conclusions drawn from the research show how photography has become a malleable artefact, capable of changing its identity in a post-modern context, and thus posing challenges for our concept of reality.

Keywords: Photography, realism, art, war, post-modernism, photojournalism

Introduction

The concept of truth and realism in photography have provided constant debate and discourse on the nature of photography as a reliable insight into the world. The original conception of photography as a medium for objective documentation, together with the camera's ability to capture moments in time gave photography a favourable identity predominantly in the early 20th century. As Brothers notes, in the 1930s, people believed in the "faith in facts and objectivity of photography" (1997, p. 11). Today, however, in light of its history, questions arise about the nature of photography and how it can affect the way people view and connect with a world that has come to rely on images to represent it. Not only are these questions imperative in understanding how we experience the world, but also what this means for our ability to grasp reality and what this reveals about our relationship to truth.

This article will draw on relevant theories presented by Sontag, Barthes and Bazin, while critically analysing the role photography plays in the photojournalism industry, addressing such genres as investigative journalism, war reporting and political agendas. It will demonstrate how the nature of photography has become fluid and malleable depending on the contexts it is employed in, showing the problems inherent in our access to reality through the various uses of photography.

Origins: photography and realism

In order to critically evaluate and discuss our contemporary understanding of photography, one must first understand how it was originally conceived, namely, what the origins of photography are and how this in turn shapes our comprehension of the concept of realism and objectivity.

With the advent of the photographic practice in the 19[th]century, the concept of realism took a new turn, as suddenly time was able to be captured as was, rather than *represented* in a painting. As Bazin notes, "For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (2005, p. 59). This shows photography's distinction from painting; reality was no longer bound by or reserved for artistic contemplation, but by photographic "proof." The lens, for Bazin, acts as an objective view onto the world, due to the "objective character of photography" as distinct from the canvas. This unwavering devotion to photography's objectivity carried into photographic practices in early photojournalism, in the use of photographs in newspapers and magazines. As Potts argues, "all these [journalistic] practices depended on a central assumption: that photography represented the world in a truthful, objective manner. The photographic negative was held as an assurance of this truth effect" (2003, p. 75). However, not only was photography represented as an objective element to be admired, but, according to Bazin, photography was a discovery that "[satisfies], once and for all and in its very essence, our *obsession* with realism" (2005, p. 59). Potts also highlights how the artistic uses of photography promote a value in realism, stating, "In art, the aesthetic code of realism emphasised the desirability of an objective depiction of reality, most fully achieved by photography" (2003, p. 59).

This view reflected the general trend of modernist thought, in which excitement for technological innovations proliferated, imbuing the potential of photography with an optimism fuelled by what the camera was capable of achieving. As Rancière notes, two questions are apparent in the aesthetics of images: "the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in" (2004, p. 20). In this instance, a clear separation emerges

between true art, that which has "precise ends" and that which only imitates "simple appearances" (2004, p. 21). It is here that Rancière makes a distinction, similar to Bazin's, between the poetic arts and what he calls the "ethical regime of images" (2004). Looking at both the origins and purposes of photography in this respect, the constant intrusion of art into photography undermines or challenges both its origins as an objective instrument, and its purposes to capture reality.

While photography is seen to offer a view of the world, it shouldn't be taken as a substitute for the real. The pertinent question surrounding its origin is how can we compare or distinguish between the photograph with the object both outside and within the photograph, the object itself? Hughes exemplifies this dilemma by alluding to the way in which we view the world through an abstract perspective: "Despite its apparent precision, perspective is a generalisation about experience. It schematizes, but does not really represent the way that we see" (1991, p. 17). This can aptly be applied to photography, in that it came to offer a *perspective* of the world, but its phenomenological capacity, that is, its ability to provide genuine *experience* of the world is somewhat limited. What we come to experience instead is a Kantian Noumena, or an experience of the object rather than the reality-in-itself (see Kant, 1934, p. 179). Thus our experiences, particularly through photography, exist only as *observations* of a reality-in-itself. Because the world can be reproduced through a single image, the world becomes lost through the lens.

This notion of reproduction is critically explored by Walter Benjamin, who expresses art's waning authenticity at the hands of mechanical reproduction. Reality, or more accurately, realism, was no longer something valued or admired given the demand for complete access. For Benjamin, the photograph did not merely represent a decline in authenticity, but the very eradication of it; we no longer experience the "aura" (1969, p. 224)

of the object we photograph. Therein lies the essential problem inherent in our faith in photography as an objective entity of accurate depiction and realism. We, the viewers, in light of photography's history as an objective medium, come to mistake, or confuse, true realism, with what Bazin (2005, p. 59) describes as "pseudorealism"– a "depiction aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind)", destabilising, therefore, photography's credibility in a post-modern context of uncertainty. Once life begins to be reproduced via technological means of reproduction, or manipulated through digital means, the realism once thought achievable is shattered, as a result of the kind of blind faith once ascribed to the advent of photographic practices.

Photojournalism in a digital age

While early twentieth-century discourse favoured the view and value of photographic objectivity, Potts (2003: 76) refers to the introduction of digital technology in the 1980s, which "threatened to unsettle this epistemological model," and has "removed the guarantee of truth held in a photographic negative." As such, the historical sense of photography as an objective mechanism begins to falter, and the emergence of an age of manipulation begins to take over, rendering photography somewhat untrustworthy, with our knowledge of the world becoming compromised. Yet despite this, a loyalty to the camera as an objective apparatus still perseveres, and our notions of reality remain just as problematic.

In a contemporary context, what audiences and consumers of media have come to understand about photojournalism through the pioneering efforts of photojournalists such as Robert Capa, is that it is meant to convey an accurate depiction of the world, as the camera, by and large, has been seen as an instrument used to capture "truth." This, however, is not always the case. As Becker states "photojournalism is whatever it can be, given the nature of

the journalism business" (1995, p. 6). This has affected the concept of the photojournalist, who has developed an iconic status, so much so that stereotypes of who or what a photojournalist embodies have taken over from a realistic view of the identity of the photojournalist. Robert Capa, Weegee, and Margaret Bourke-White are the typical figures associated with the glorified or romantic ideal of the photojournalist who goes into war zones and risks their lives to bring the truth to the public. The reality is quite different.

As Becker notes, gone are the days of the independent, investigative photojournalist in the style of Weegee. The problems encountered today in the uses of photography in this industry, as Tagg writes, is more to do with the history of photography: "The problem with photographic evidence is historical, not existential" (1988, p. 4). The viewers of these images of death and destruction have a tendency to accept and trust what they are seeing is true, given that photojournalism is meant to be "unbiased, factual and complete" (Becker, p. 6). Yet the independent photojournalists, that is, those that actively and fastidiously seek out the truth for the sake of truth itself, rather than just for the sake of a story, have become somewhat of a rarity. Instead, what photojournalists set out to photograph is often embedded within the values – social or economic – of their employer. The business is constrained, as Becker states, "by the way editors hand out photographic assignments", and so what is photographed is not necessarily legitimate or raw. Photojournalists rarely have the opportunity to take the kinds of "realistic" images they themselves may want to take. The late photojournalist Jocelyn Benzakin remarked, she edited with "aesthetics in mind" (Langton, 2009, p. 73). While Benzakin was not solely concerned with the glamorisation of photos, stating that she also tried to have a message within the photograph (2009, p. 74), the story is still the priority of the photojournalist, reinforcing the practice of photojournalism as one that

constructs a narrative, where truth is presented only insofar as it complements the aesthetics of that story.

The photojournalism industry, rather than having as its primary focus the accurate portrayal of the world and its people, is a part of the social construction of reality that is also a product of textual journalism. With images, however, there is a supposed "authenticity" that purports to support the text. But these images can be just as manipulated as the text itself, if not more so. Particularly in contemporary photographic practice when digital manipulation is common practice, photojournalists are not regarded as unbiased and trustworthy, but have developed a reputation of deceptiveness and ruthlessness in order to get the image they need. As Hartley notes, photojournalism has developed "a poisonous, contaminated reputation" (1996, p. 198).

The influence of the photographer on the image

A photograph is not simply made up of the content inside it; rather a photograph is always saturated with signs and symbols that, depending on both the status of photographer and viewer, changes meaning and significance through the eyes of others. As Barthes (2009, p. 107) notes, "the conventions of photography, moreover, are replete with signs." So the meaning of a photograph, depending on one's own background, is not something that is fixed and stable, whose signs are interpreted the same the world over. Rather the context the images are read in affect, either positively or negatively, the nature and meaning of a particular photograph. As Becker states, photographs get meaning "from their contexts" (1995, p. 8) – they cannot exist in isolation. Thus the way in which photographers capture and convey an event is directly reflected by their own cultural and socio-economic perspective.

While discourses of objectivity have been dominant, the limits to which a journalist can accurately and indifferently portray an event is quite restricted by their own backgrounds. As such no image is free of manipulation. While photojournalists have attempted to justify their roles, as Taylor (1998, p p. 13-14) remarks, by stating their contribution to the understanding of others, this understanding is marred by their own views – what Becker (1995) believes is a superficial understanding. For instance, thousands of photographs were taken of the World Trade Centre being destroyed in New York on September 11, but no two images were exactly the same, even if the elements of the photographs were similar.

In fact, in every case of war, natural disasters or accidents, thousands of images always capture the same event, but they are never taken with the same inherent context, nor do they, as such, show the same exact footage. Instead photographers impose their own understanding onto an event. Photographer Dorothea Lange for example, in her photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936, See Figure 1), "projected her own attitude onto the subject", according to Cooke (2009, p. 126), conveying a sense of empathy and understanding. However, decades later, a woman named Florence Owens Thompson identified herself as the woman who Lange photographed, claiming that she had exploited her: "I wish she hadn't taken my picture…I can't get a penny out of it. [Lange] didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did" (Dunn, 2002). Years later, Owens's son Troy stated after gaining financial aid from the photo, "I guess we had only looked at it from our perspective…the photo had always been a bit of a curse. After all those letters came in, I think it gave us a sense of pride" (Cooke, 2009, p. 127).

Figure 1. Migrant Mother, Florence Owens Thompson, Nipomo, California, 1936. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. Library of Congress, Washington DC.
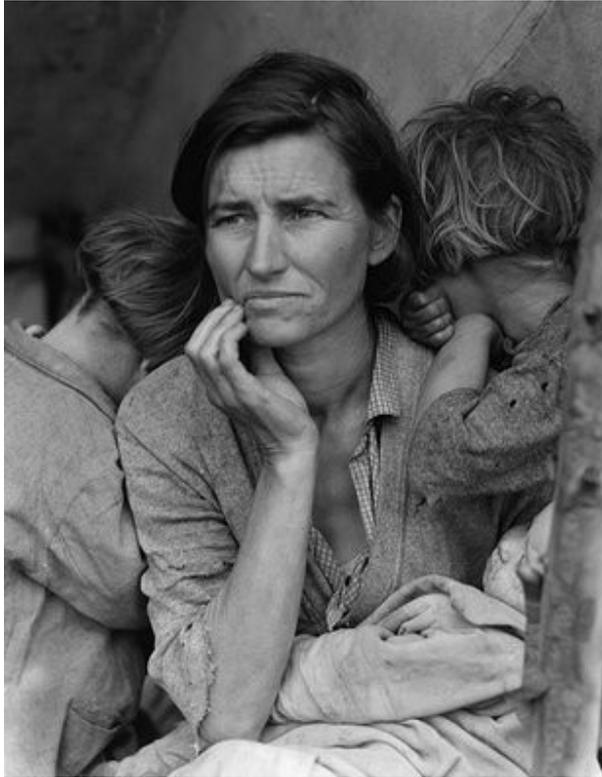
This example demonstrates that no photograph can be taken objectively, with no opinion or bias behind it. Even if the intentions of the photographer is to report objectively, inevitably their own *Habitus*, a term coined by Bourdieu (1984), will still permeate through the lens onto their subject matter to convey their own perspective about the world. Hence the identity of the photograph is malleable to the photographer's own identity, if not a reflection of it.

Desensitisation: social influence on how an image is viewed

The potential for meaning in a photograph is compromised not only through cultural misunderstandings and bias, but societal inertia and indifference. In what has been dubbed the "post-modern" era, the blurring of truth and falsehood has become so incessant that any image conveying suffering or death has invariably come to lose its emotional and societal value, in which it instead functions as a sign that has come to lose its signifier, a symbol that

takes on a life of its own. In Taylor's terms, viewers of images of death become bored. There

is a disconnection between the image and the viewer, where the message and meaning is no

longer able to be conveyed because western societies have almost become desensitised to

images of "the suffering of strangers" (2000, p. 129). In effect there is no emotional or

comprehensible connection between the world in the photograph and the world of the

viewer. As war films and documentaries have become more popular and therefore

sensationalised, any photograph taken of a war victim in contemporary society is subject to

the indifference of the post-modern viewer, who has supposedly seen so much bloodshed

that any photograph of death no longer resonates on a deep emotional level. This is what

Barthes calls *punctum* (1982, p. 27), where a photograph "pricks" the viewer. Instead, many

viewers are apathetic, in Barthes' terms *studium,* meaning that only a general interest in

provoked.

The identity of the photograph has been constructed by idealistic images of death and

war. Photojournalism's role in this case, is its tendency to reflect events of war and

destruction akin to the Hollywood frame of drama and bloodshed so as to enthral viewers.

This is what Taylor expresses concern over, believing one of the significant problems of

photojournalism to be the way in which the industry portrays such events as entertainment.

Taylor (2000, p. 129) states that "news has become more entertaining and trivial than

concerned or controversial", and further acknowledges that interest in images of death and

terror are soon followed by boredom. Susan Sontag classifies this phenomenon observed in

those viewing horrific photographic images as the viewer moving from shock to indifference,

stating, "a pseudo-familiarity with the horrible reinforces alienation, making one less able to

react in real life" (1977, p. 41).

Furthermore, Taylor describes photography as a screen in two senses, one in which it displays something that is distant, and another in which it is a defence against "the threat of engagement" (1998, p. 14). Due primarily to the media's incessant circulation of such images, therefore, the viewers are offered a safe distance from this particular world which is projected to them only via screens. The audience, as Debord (1994, p. 6) puts it, come to prefer the 'representation to reality'. What death and suffering is in a photograph is not of equal impact as the real thing, and this is what contemporary audiences seem to favour. The lens acts as a safety barrier between two similar but ultimately separate worlds, allowing the viewer distance from the realities of events like war and terror. Consequently, the incessant images of death and war have moved the world even further from the viewers, whose experiences lie entirely within the realm of sensationalism to the extent where the world becomes a spectacle. Hence the symbols in these photographs are left to be interpreted, rendering photography fluid in significance.

Uses of photos for propaganda

In the hands of journalists, photography is able to not only play with concepts of realism simply for sensationalism or entertainment, but to sway social and cultural values in the publisher's favour by turning photography into an instrument of propaganda and censorship. As Hartley writes, "realism…is not so much a textual property as a cultural propaganda campaign designed to persuade readerships (no matter what the evidence) that what they see is so" (1998, p. 204). In a supposed "post-truth" society, stemming from the concept of post-modernism, realism and reality has become more of a manipulative device, where, thanks to the technological era of photoshop and other photograph manipulation tools,

photojournalists can create a kind of reality to conjure up a "positive" perception as a tool for governmental persuasion.

As an example, the official photograph taken at Mao Zedong's funeral in 1976 (see Figure 2) which was first published in the *People's Daily*, showed the Communist group Gang of Four present at the funeral. A month after it was published, another photograph was released, this time without the Gang of Four present. This was done to instil or depict Chinese political views by removing the unfavourable ties Zedong had with the Gang of Four, who were arrested one month after his death.

Figure 2. *Mourners at Mao Zedong's Funeral, People's Daily. The original image shows the Gang of Four present, where in the digitally re-touched image they have disappeared.*
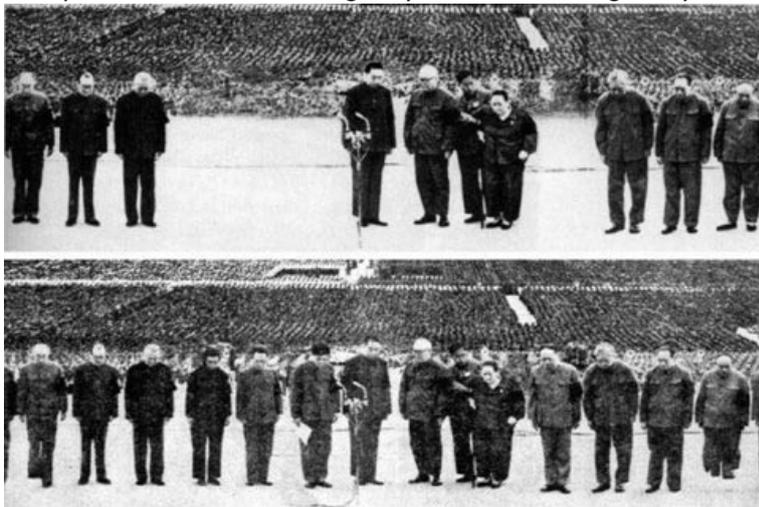
This kind of practice is evidently not out of the ordinary in photojournalism. When Cuban political activist Carlos Franqui cut off relations with Fidel Castro's regime in 1968, his image was removed from a photograph with Castro, to which he wrote about being erased: "I discover my photographic death" (Farid, 2007).

There are a great many more examples of such a phenomenon as digital manipulation in times of political strife or conflict. In order to depict a reality that favours the political agenda of one party, photographers are able to create a version of the truth, what Hartley

calls "photographic realism" (1998, p. 206). As such, what is real and what is represented are two entirely different things. In regards to this photographic manipulation, Taylor writes,

> Photographs of the Holocaust are not windows onto the real thing; what photographs represent is not fully revealed to vision or understanding. What do they signify? Would anyone be justified in moving the death camp photographs from their status as traces of 'what the Nazis did' as a matter of fact into a more shadowy realm, where 'what the Nazis did' is uncertain, unverified, unknown? (1999, p. 165).

By this account, what we know of political history is not simply a ruse or wholly fabricated by the photograph, but has become uncertain, an event whose reality remains forever unknown. Only the reality of those whose views the photograph supports is conveyed, and as such any photograph of a political or war event is subject to obscure an unattractive truth for a more favourable reality. As Walter Benjamin writes, "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (1973, p. 257).

Conclusion

Despite being a moment captured in time, a photograph is not a motionless artefact; photography takes on chameleonic qualities, forever changing its meaning, significance and identity through the impressions of those behind the camera, no longer considered wholly objective in nature or separate from the field of arts. As such, and through the notoriously dishonest industry of photojournalism, photography has no fixed or stable identity, but is malleable to whoever uses it, with the ability to shift from an instrument of truth to one of manipulation. Photography therefore exists, through its various uses ranging from the artistic

to the devious, as a blank slate or canvas of interpretation, in which it can no longer be called

upon to offer a reliable insight into our experience or knowledge of the world.

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