

PHOTOGRAPHY AND COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF INTERRELATIONSHIP

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Abstract:

Photography has arguably become one of the most potent instruments of communication for a contemporary artist. Its versatility, suggested truthfulness and the way in which artists distort or interpret "reality" has been a part of photography since the advent of the daguerreotype in 1839. Taking photographs today are no longer primarily an act of memory intended to safeguard a family's pictorial heritage, but is increasingly becoming a tool for an individual's identity formation and communication. Digital cameras, camera-phones, photo-blogs and other multipurpose devices are used to promote the use of images as the preferred idiom of a new generation of users. The aim of this article is to explore how photography has developed through time in itself and at the same time went on reshaping ideas of communication. Photography has touched and influenced almost all the major aspects of communication; the conclusion calls for a broader consideration of the links between the history of photography and media.

Keywords: Photography, Media, Communication, Culture, Art history.

Introduction:

“The first thing to observe about the world of the 1780s is that it was at once much smaller and much larger than ours. It was smaller geographically ... Yet if the world was in many respects smaller, the sheer difficulty or uncertainty of communications made it in practice much vaster than it is today.”

This is how eminent Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm starts the first pages of his seminal work on world history in four volumes. In this book, *The Age of Revolution*, Hobsbawm also mentions that the news of fall of Bastille took thirteen days to reach the Spanish capital Madrid which is nearly just 1200 kms away from Paris. Living in today's lightning fast era of global communication, this fact seems unbelievable. No wonder that the introduction of internet technology revolutionized the global communication but the tool that made these communications interesting and to a certain extent reliable, is Photography. It's a strange fact that the face we have all seen of one of the greatest army general of all time, Napoleon

Bonaparte, is through a portrait painter's eye, therefore it has always been a second hand visual experience for all of us. Similarly we can only imagine how beautiful Helen of Troy was to ignite the war between two cities. What will happen to a famous fashion magazine like Vogue without the presence of photography or who will feel any attraction towards a National Geographic magazine without having any colourful photographs? Therefore a post-apocalyptic society like Fullerton from William Bornefeld's science fiction novel Time and Light, where photographs are prohibited would seem terrifying to anyone from present time. One might say that drawings can substitute a major portion of camera-generated images, but drawing is a slow, and highly skilled, process. One key impetus behind the invention of photography in the 1830s was the desire to escape from the restrictions imposed by handcrafted images. In the absence of photographic reproduction techniques, if drawings are to be issued in significant numbers they will need to be hand engraved onto a metal plate or wooden block. Two key consequences result from this laborious technique: both would significantly limit the number of images in circulation. The key objective of this study therefore would be to investigate how photography along with its own technological evolution through the advancements of optical science went on influencing different aspects of communication.

A Brief Look at the Development of Photography: Around the year 1800, British inventor Thomas Wedgwood made the first known attempt to capture the image in a 'camera obscura' by means of a light-sensitive substance. He used paper or white leather treated with silver nitrate. Although he succeeded in capturing the shadows of objects placed on the surface in direct sunlight, it was reported in 1802 that "the images formed by means of a camera obscura have been found too faint to produce, in any moderate time, an effect upon the nitrate of silver." The shadow images eventually darkened all over. The first permanent photo-etching was an image produced in 1822 by the French inventor Nicéphore Niépce, but it was destroyed in a later attempt to make prints from it. Niépce was successful again in 1825. In 1826, he made the *View from the Window at Le Gras*, the earliest surviving photograph from nature.

Because Niépce's camera photographs required an extremely long exposure (at least eight hours and probably several days), he sought to greatly improve his bitumen process or replace it with one that was more practical. In partnership with Louis Daguerre, he worked out post-exposure processing methods that produced visually superior results and replaced the bitumen with a more light-sensitive resin, but hours of exposure in the camera were still required. With an eye to eventual commercial exploitation, the partners



View from the Window at Le Gras

opted for total secrecy. Niépce died in 1833 and Daguerre then redirected the experiments toward the light-sensitive silver halides. Daguerre's efforts culminated in what would later be named the daguerreotype process.

Meanwhile, another British inventor, William Fox Talbot, had succeeded in making crude but reasonably light-fast silver images on paper as early as 1834 but had kept his work secret. After reading about Daguerre's invention in January 1839, Talbot published his hitherto secret method and set about improving on it. Talbot's paper-based photography typically required hours-long exposures in the camera, but in 1840 he created the calotype process, which used the chemical development of a latent image to greatly reduce the exposure. In both its original and calotype forms, Talbot's process, unlike Daguerre's, created a translucent negative which could be used to print multiple positive copies; this is the basis of most modern chemical photography up to the present day. British chemist John Herschel made many contributions to this new field. He invented the cyanotype process, later familiar as the "blueprint". He was the first to use the terms "photography", "negative" and "positive". He made the first glass negative in late 1839. Glass plates were the medium for most original camera photography from the late 1850s until the general introduction of flexible plastic films during the 1890s. Although the convenience of the film greatly popularized amateur photography, early films were somewhat more expensive and of markedly lower optical quality than their glass plate equivalents, and until the late 1910s they were not available in the large formats preferred by most professional photographers.

Hurter and Driffield began pioneering work on the light sensitivity of photographic emulsions in 1876. The first flexible photographic roll film was marketed by George Eastman in 1885, but this original "film" was actually a coating on a paper base. As part of the processing, the image-bearing layer was stripped from the paper and transferred to a hardened gelatin support. The first transparent plastic roll film followed in 1889. It was made from highly flammable nitrocellulose ("celluloid"), now usually called "nitrate film". Cellulose acetate or "safety film" was introduced later by Kodak in 1908. Originally, all photography was monochrome, or black-and-white. Even after color film was readily available, black-and-white photography continued to dominate for decades, due to its lower cost and its "classic" photographic look. Color photography was explored beginning in the 1840s. Early experiments in color required extremely long exposures (hours or days for camera images) and could not "fix" the photograph to prevent the color from quickly fading when exposed to white light.

The first permanent color photograph was taken in 1861 using the three-color-separation principle first published by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell in 1855. The foundation of virtually all practical color processes, Maxwell's idea was to take three separate black-and-white photographs through red, green and blue filters. Kodachrome, the first modern "integral tripack" (or "monopack") color film, was introduced by Kodak in 1935.

In 1981, Sony unveiled the first consumer camera to use a charge-coupled device for imaging, eliminating the need for film: the Sony Mavica. While the Mavica saved images to disk, the images were displayed on television, and the camera was not fully digital. In 1991, Kodak unveiled the DCS 100, the first commercially available digital single lens reflex camera.

Although it's high cost precluded uses other than photojournalism and professional photography, commercial digital photography was born.

Art of Photography and Communication: While trying to figure out the interrelationships between art, photography and communication the two obvious questions that comes to one's

mind are- is art a mode of communication? And is photography art? Let's now take the questions one by one. Firstly, yes art is a certain kind of specialized communication. Communication is the act of conveying meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood mediums. Communication is not necessarily art. Art does not equal communication, but all art is a communication. In mathematical terms, art is a member of the set of communication. What makes art different and special is that a communication that has certain values. People consider a communication art when it has some merit, worth or excellence. Perhaps a better word than value would be quality. This is how ordinary people use the term art. So this is not really a "theory." It's an observation of observed phenomena. The term "art" is used to describe any communication that can be valued as to excellence. That's quite a definition for art, the quality of communication. What is interesting about this way of understanding and analyzing art is that the magnitude of predictions and explanations that comes out as results. By considering art in the class of communication, we have an organizing principle that can be used to predict, measure, enhance or create art. We have a way of helping our own art, and we have a way of helping other artists. For example, if art is communication, it follows the rules of communication. If it's too original, it is difficult for people to comprehend. If it's too unoriginal or cliché, it's boring. Too loud and it's irritating. Too quiet and it has no impact at all. If the subject bears no relationship with the experiences of the perceiver, it is not likely to be grasped. If it deals with a subject in a way that is not stimulating, it is not likely to be valued. So, we see that we can easily dismiss binary logic as applied to art. It is never therefore "art or not art;" rather, it is the *degree* of art.

Now let's come to the second question- since the very invention of photography this debate persists till date whether photography is art or not. At an early meeting of the Photographic Society of London, established in 1853, one of the members complained that the new technique was "too literal to compete with works of art" because it was unable to "elevate the imagination". It was a Victorian argument between photography pioneers and art-establishment traditionalists. Eventually, the traditionalists lost (or died): nowadays photographs are increasingly significant in the world's major art institutions, such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Tate. And despite their inherent lack of uniqueness, works by modern and contemporary photographers such as Edward Weston and Andreas Gursky are regularly auctioned at Christie's and Sotheby's, occasionally for millions of pounds. Photography is even an important aspect of the practice of many major artists not usually thought of as photographers, such as David Hockney, Tracey Emin and Gerhard Richter. It seems facile, therefore, to argue that photographs cannot be art. So why do some still cling to this view? Photographs are taken by an apparatus directly 'from life', the image made not by an artist, but by the light of the world. This leads many to see photographs as straightforward mechanical reproductions of people and things. But often, photographs are by no means artless, unmediated records of the world, and have instead been subjected to a vast range of artistic meddling: scenic, technical, presentational, contextual, and so on. The American photographer Garry Winogrand justly said that- 'The photograph isn't what was photographed, it's something else. It's about transformation.' The duality of art and document associated with photography – the 'rendered' and the 'real' - is actually a great strength of photography. It helps to explain why photographs fascinate us so much.

Therefore from the logic of deductive reasoning we can conclude that photography also communicates. But how does it communicate? It certainly does not communicate exactly the way a painting does or any other art form does.

Different Genres of Photography and Communication: Similar to all the art forms photography too is divided into several genres like- documentary, abstract, fashion, fine art, war, advertising etc. All of these different genres communicate to us in a completely different way. In order to understand the interrelationship between photography and communication we must look at different genres independently and figure out how they communicate.

(1) Documentary Photography: It usually refers to a popular form of photography used to chronicle events or environments both significant and

relevant to history and historical events as well as everyday life. It is typically covered in professional photojournalism, or real life reportage. Arriving in Bhopal on the morning after the Union Carbide gas leak, Raghu Rai saw a very different India, one of pessimism, pain and despair. Shocked and deeply moved, he immediately began to document the horror and captured, without sentiment, a community in trauma. On returning to Delhi, Raghu Rai released his now-famous photograph 'Burial of an unknown child' which sent shock waves around the world. When asked by a reporter how difficult was it to emotionally capture the painful images of Bhopal gas leak Raghu answered- "The difficulty was not emotional, because if you get emotional and sentimental, then you cannot do your work cleanly and clearly. Emotions have to be frozen. You have to look at the situation with a cool eye and warm heart so that you capture the tragedy the way it is unfolding itself. Emotions and sentiments are something that a professional cannot indulge in and in fact should not indulge in. If you have to deliver something meaningful and powerful, it is only possible when you are alert and sensitive." This is the mantra of documentary photography. It should be an unbiased document if the photographer wants to communicate with truthfulness. Looking at this particular photograph one can clearly imagine the horror of the site, leaving no room for any errors which textual descriptions might have encouraged otherwise.



(2) War Photography: Photography was not there during the reign of terror while French Revolution was on and when for a time, executions by guillotine were a popular form of entertainment that attracted great crowds of spectators, with vendors selling programs listing the names of the condemned. Therefore it only exists in the form of visual document as painters saw it. But we didn't have to depend on such imaginary or second hand visual depictions through painting in case of Spanish Civil War, as a famous war photographer Robert Capa was there to capture it. This is his famous photograph of a militiaman getting hit by bullet in the warfront.



Photography's ability to capture

every aspect of war—from beginning to end—becomes almost troublingly clear. Dedicated not just to the thick of the fight, but also to the events leading up to as well as the consequences thereafter, war photography demonstrates how deep our need is to picture war as a means to understand it and, perhaps, avoid it.

(3) Fashion Photography: “The idea which man forms of beauty imprints itself throughout his attire, rumples or stiffens his garments, rounds off or aligns his gestures, and, finally, even subtly penetrates the features of his face.” Such was the idea of Charles Baudelaire regarding fashion. He emphasizes on fashion, citing it as one of the key visual indicators of modernity. Over the last few decades fashion images have engaged with new technology and proved politically and aesthetically provocative, economically useful, and ideologically powerful. If we look at fashion photography in a more



Photograph by Helmut Newton

nuanced way, we should maybe ask the seemingly obvious yet impossible to answer question of how we define the genre of fashion photography and which responsibilities it can take on. It would be wrong to examine fashion photography only through the eyes of advertisement or prettiness. It would overlook its ability to be a possible form of communicating (self-) - expression, commentary on the world at large and/or reflection of time. Understanding fashion photography as a serious medium of expression means not only to include a constant view and reflection on the world but to also certainly exclude our self-made boundaries within

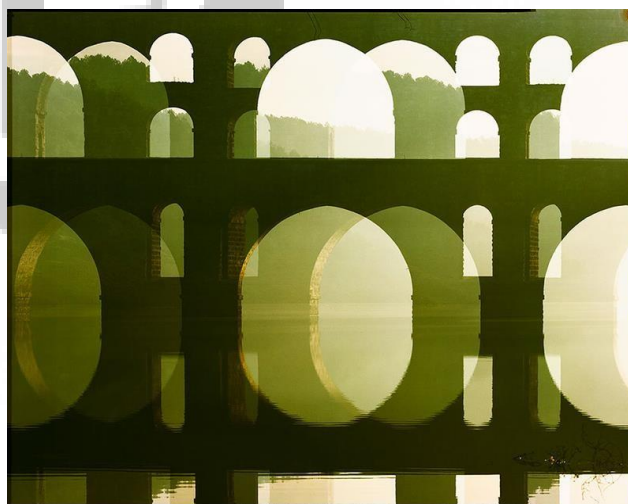
contemporary culture.

(4) Composite Photography: Photography usually captures exactly what the camera sees, but that isn't the case with the composite approach. It features multiple photographs in a single image. The individual photos are shot and then digitally patched together into one photograph often giving rise to a surrealistic sensation to the viewer. The goal of this kind of surreal image making is not representational at all. On the contrary it seeks to reveal the unknown, to penetrate the mysterious dimensions of which the viewer is completely unaware- to break out the narrow confines of the 'workaday world', to explode, to arouse the elements of surprise.



International Journal of English | *Photograph by Matt Molloy*

(5) Abstract Photography: It is sometimes called non-objective, experimental or concrete photography. A means of depicting a visual image that does not have an immediate association with the object world and that has been created through the use of photographic equipment, processes or materials. An abstract photograph may isolate a fragment of a natural



Photograph by Ola Kolehmainen

scene in order to remove its inherent context from the viewer, it may be purposely staged to communicate a seemingly unreal appearance from real objects, or it may involve the use of color, light, shadow, texture, shape and/or form to convey a feeling, sensation or impression. Abstract and surreal are two different worlds and styles. Abstract is more aligned with the deconstruction or the personal perspective of a concept; whereas, surrealism typically depicts the irrational, unconscious mind beyond the constraints of the rational world. Abstract photographs can also make people uneasy because they don't automatically know what the art is "about" just by a cursory glance. Or they assume that because it doesn't look like anything, then it is not "about" anything. Abstract art doesn't contain recognizable objects, so there is nothing to grasp or hold onto. This can be very confusing, even threatening, to some who are not used to assigning their own meaning to what they see before them. Therefore it acts as a stimulant to imagination.

(6) Advertising Photography: Photography is the single most important element of most advertising campaigns. While copywriters may spend hours producing an eye-catching headline and copy that explains the benefits of a product, it's the image that first attracts the viewer. It's also the last thing the viewer usually remembers after turning the page. The photograph has to be absolutely clear about the line the company wants to take with the product, the kind of image they want it to possess, and the messages they want it to convey. Here is an advertising photograph-from a campaign shot by photographer Nadav Kander for Britain's National Health Service. The idea was to raise the awareness of the ill effects of passive smoking.

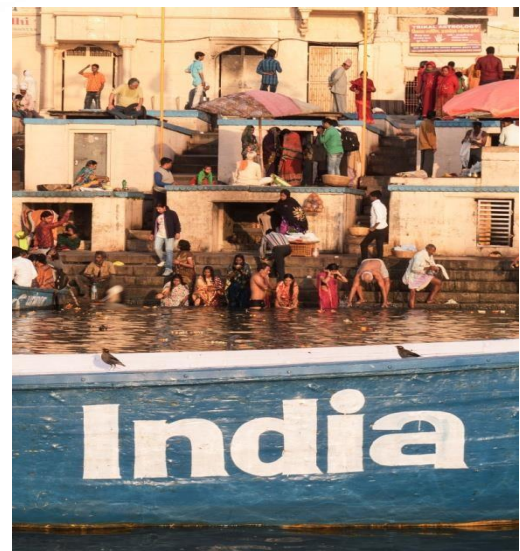


(7) Street Photography: Street photography is photography conducted for art or enquiry that features unmediated chance encounters and random incidents within public places. The street

photographer can be seen as an extension of the *flâneur*, an observer of the streets (who was often a writer or artist). Street photography can focus on people and their behavior in public, thereby also recording people's history. In this respect the street photographer is similar to social documentary photographers or photojournalists who also work in public places, but with the aim of capturing newsworthy events; any of these photographers' images may capture people and property visible within or from public places. The existence of services like Google Street View, recording public space at a massive scale is also a form of street photography. Here is a celebrated photograph by eminent photographer Henri Cartier- Bresson, taken in Paris in 1932. Henri Cartier-Bresson, was a 20th century photographer whose poetic style focused on the actions of people in time and place. He was responsible in the 1950s for the idea of taking a picture at what he termed the "decisive moment", "when form and content, vision and composition merged into a transcendent whole". For another street photographer Eric Kim, the opposite idea of 'decisive moment' works as the mantra, as he says- "I then started to switch up my style, focusing less on the Henri Cartier-Bresson 'decisive moment' type of photography, and shooting more 'street portraits.' I craved to get closer to my subjects, not only physically, but emotionally. My personal is that of an extreme extrovert. I find energy when interacting with others. For me, street photography was an excuse for me to talk to strangers, hear their life story, and open up my heart to them (and have them opened up their heart to me)."



(8) Travel Photography: Imagine how far more interesting and attractive Xuanzang's travelogue would have been if photography was there those days and he was having a camera along with him. Travel photography is a genre of photography that may involve the documentation of an area's landscape, people, cultures, customs and history. The Photographic Society of America defines a travel photo- "as an image that expresses the feeling of a time and place, portrays a land, its people, or a culture in its natural state, and has no geographical limitations." Travel photography is not only about discovering beautiful destinations, it can



Photograph by Debashish Ghosh

also be a passport to meeting new people, experiencing other cultures and discovering common ground as well as differences. Photography can be a powerful tool for telling stories and creating awareness and understanding across cultures, communities, and countries.

(9) Wildlife Photography: There are many worlds co-existing on this planet earth than our own world. Worlds of other creatures than that of human beings. We human beings are curious about those other worlds and it is this curiosity that paved the road for wildlife photographers. Wildlife photography is a genre of photography concerned with documenting various forms of wildlife in their natural habitat. The aim primarily is to present those parallel lives, the aesthetics of their existence, their struggle into the wild and also to discover the existence of hitherto unknown species. Not only that it also gives us a reality check sometimes by depicting the violence that we human being have brought upon those parallel lives causing many of the species to become extinct.



But for what good? Maybe to boast our superficial bourgeois lifestyle or to serve wired medieval superstitious ideas. These elephant feet footstools are among some 1.3m confiscated wildlife products housed in a repository near Denver, Colorado.

Conclusion:

From the detailed discussion on the different genres of photography it is therefore evident that all photographs is intended to communicate something. They all do not necessarily communicate the same thing but they do communicate and it is the gamut of the communication that different photographs bring along is what made photography so essential a tool for a better understanding of human life in a very aesthetic sense. If a photograph is seen as an image in its own right, the self-expression of the photographer plays a role. It is exercised through processes such as framing, shutter speed, film and paper choice etc. as a result the ability of the photographer to express himself is related to his mastery of the processes. This in turn can lead to the linking of self-expression. The philosopher C.S. Peirce developed a theory of signs in order to understand language. In his system of semiotics, the index is a sign that has a direct link (causal, sequential or spatial) with its subject, e.g. smoke and fire. However, an icon is a reconstruction that resembles or imitates the subject. This distinction between photography's sign being the index and painting's the icon is fundamental and suggests that the 'happy snapper' is closer to the real function of photography than the

few art photographers whose work is hung in galleries.

Photography is distinctive in its instantaneity, its ability to rapidly disseminate, its capability to depict realism, its universality, and its prevalent practice. The camera is a tool that helps people to communicate visually what they find noteworthy in their life. Human brain needs curiosity to probe the world around it. We have all been given the gift of curiosity and an allotment of creative talent. The imagination needs a platform to explore, express, and recall. Scharfstein (2009) expressed that the results of very successful art making culminates in the makers feeling of astonishment and gratitude. When people have a creative platform to successfully communicate that which words cannot express, they enhance their state of being too.

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