

Analyzing Photography

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The use of photography is constantly searching new meanings in an ever-demanding inexhaustible world of image consumption-production. Be it that those images are presented on a printable emulsion, a bright electronic screen or plainly suggested to appear on the mental canvas of the spectator through conceptual artifices, images are on a daily basis eroding the crystal of our perception. In a way as we reflect on matters like originality, spectatorship and narrative to name a few, we become conscious and note how some photography students are finding themselves caught in a somehow too structured and suffocating medium, where genre plays the role of dictation rather than a venue for creative freedom, pictures have to fit somewhere.

Although this is quite a particular and radical view, and in a way it is only part of that restless feeling that photography evokes in contemporary creation, we also find another aspect that seems captivating, which can be seen plainly as “the conceptual perception” of the medium. Departing from the idea of holism where the world is understood in its totality, photography can still appear somehow intriguing for the artist, where the attention is laid primarily in its very essence, that of fragmentation.

It's a known fact that we can go from the universal to the particular, but not the other way around, although we get seduced with the idea that by actually doing it, we can somehow explain the world around us. It is precisely in this light that we embark in photography on a search or a quest towards the non-photographic representation. We seek to experiment with a conceptual approach where fragmentation or extraction becomes the very device of art production. Consciously we construct a bridge with the use of our individual voices and the knowledge laid before us, asking and questioning

ourselves if there could be a path towards refreshment, or maybe a new meaning in the use of photographic representation in the realm of the non-photographic.

Viewing Photographs

Looking at photographs as if they are photographs or as if they are coded messages, detailed capsules of information, statements or manifestations of self-expression. This is a key question to ask oneself when engaging in the act of photographic survey. It comes quite clear that in any way one looks at a photograph, be it superficially while driving fast passing by a billboard, or in a photo exhibition, we are going to pick up something of a message, anything will stick, there is no way out of getting nothing once we have seen the image. Photographs are made with different intentions and generally they are made with a viewer in mind, even if that viewer is to be the image-maker, they still have an intention behind, a purpose. As Terry Barrett puts it: “Photographs are considerably more than the automatic recordings of portable picturing machines and deserve detailed attention.”

Photography is one of the ways in which we consume the most amount of information in today’s hyper-busy societies. The many channels that display an array of information to us are endless and keep growing *ad-eternum*. Photography tends to be an easy medium to display information, especially in contemporary society where pretty much every single human being is capable of pointing and clicking the camera at anything that positions in front of them, the medium lends itself to gratuitously to indulge everyone’s desire. We can also say that somehow every person that presses the button and click’s a picture wants to say something, some might be more visually literate and technically capable of creating more congruent and elaborated images, but in whatever way we look at it, everybody wants to say something with their picture, every image matters.

According to British documentary maker Adam Curtis we live in ‘the century of the self’, this being a result of idealistic implementations since the early 1900’s based on Freudian ideas on the individual and its relation to society. Theories that pointed out

to the liberation of the individual through what some might call a capitalistic democracy, a place where the individual frees itself through fulfilling his self interest, according to his desires, desires that he pleases through being capable of consuming those things that he finds to be liberating and self-fulfilling. Concretely 'those things' are 'products', consumer goods and concepts created by corporations, designed and set out there into the world, with the idea that when individuals reach them, acquire them and possess them, they will be capable of engrossing themselves to achieve happiness and fulfillment.

Today we live in what is called the 'i generation', the great moment of the century of the self, the moment where individual matters more than society, a moment in human history where we praise the power of one over everyone, a moment where everyone wants to be the one that matters. This achievement has many levels, possessing certain goods or controlling certain concepts, gives individuals in different sectors of society the idea that they are unique as long as they can tailor themselves through consuming products that reflect their individuality. When we think of i-phone, i-pad, i-touch, etc. The word 'I' (me) is overtly present. From there we grow into other concepts, like I will post my pictures on my facebook, so my friends can see who I am, not by who I really am, but how I show myself to be. We praise the self, our 'i' when it shines, when it bursts as an insatiable egomaniac, and we feel thrilled when those around us applaud it, or better said, 'like' it.

It is precisely in this 'i generation' where photography plays a main role. Although photography is not a person or a conscious force, we tend to feel that photography matters, that when I make a picture it matters, for me and for those that are in the picture. These topics were clearly stated by Susan Sontag's in her "On Photography" book, while referring for example on how when we presence an important event and we don't photograph it, we tend to mean that the event was not worthy of being photographed, photographing gives value to things. We tend to see photography as something playful and innocent, in some cases important and life changing, at times as something helpful and fun, or as something that could also be dangerous when unwanted photographs spill on the outside of our realm. But in general we don't tend to think that photography is part of a gigantic machine of consumerism that promotes anxiety and endless unfulfilled desires. Think of the of the money that the multimillion industries that produce cameras and their gadgets generate, think of how the perfect camera is never there, how the next camera will improve what is already there, how we crave for more images, how we want to look better for the camera and how we are so conscious that we might be photographed at all times or feel jealous

when others get the photographic attention but not us, in essence, an endless body of desires and un-fulfillment for the human conscious.

It is in this critical posture that I wish to support my analysis on photography while simultaneously utilizing the giving methods in class; this because to my impression we all seem to be a bit too happy and satisfy with what's going on in the 'photo world'. Of course I don't mean to mock down the excitement that photography brings about to those involve in it, including myself, but I will like to orbit around another side of photography, while at the same time I will attempt to find for myself an alternative way of looking at it. A side that is busy with producing images, images of superb quality and breathtaking content, photographs that become the aspiration of many but that only a few get to reach. Great images that set the pace for promoting the unlimited desire of photographing, the so called 'photo addiction', the 'obsession to photograph', the dream of producing 'those photographs that people talk about...'

Could it be that there is more to photography than just this bottomless desire to crave for more, to wonder which celebrity is going to be photographed next, who is the new up-and-coming model? But let's leave mainstream media out, how about those moving photographs from people dying in miserable conditions, those places at the end of the world disappearing because of global warming, that social reportage that makes us wonder about 'the other' out there? Do we really care about anything that is happening on the other side of the images, or are we just so caught up by the mechanistic reproductive nature of the medium that we just keep looking, pressing, capturing and reproducing insatiably to get more pictures?

In any way, we crave photographs, we need them, on our computer, on our walls, on our advertisements, on our surroundings, we need our photo-fix like drug junkies and although we find ourselves generally disappointed with the quality of the images around us, we still say: Wow, those are cool! ...I wish I could do that! How do I contribute to the archive of humanities visual legacy? Is my photographic outpour going to matter, for whom and for what? Whose pictures should matter? We ask this questions with nervousness even when we already may know the answer, only to find ourselves in a paradoxical crux when we read Wolfgang Tillmans photo book title: "If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters".

Analyzing Photographs

For my analysis of the images I will use Terry Barret's method of analyzing photographs, in conjunction with John Szarkowski's "mirrors and windows". But before I continue, I will like to add Barret's comment on approaching the use of his method in his article "Part III, Teaching About Photography: Types of Photographs" it reads as follows: "Attempts to place a photograph in one of these six categories is an interpretive act. As with all interpretations, placing a photograph into a category requires reasons in support of the placement, and any placement is open to counter-argument". It is there precisely in this statement that I wish to base my very own analysis of the photographs, on the '*interpretative*' rather than on the objective.

The Sartorialist, is a fashion blog by Scott Schuman in New York. After leaving a fashion sales position to take care of his daughter in 2005, he began carrying a digital camera around on the streets of New York City, taking pictures of people who had dressed in a way that caught his eye, and then posting them to his blog. He pioneered fashion photography in blog form.



Fig1.1

The Sartorialist view is clearly that of a 'window' point of view, in both of his images. Although we might immediately try to link these images to be merely categorized as 'descriptive photographs', but when we look at them closer and with more detail, we recognize certain aspects that might deceive us. To start we can say that the pictures have a deadpan composition, they are shot with a telephoto lens from the distance, characters in the pictures are generally caught off-guard and they take place in the street, any street. That's how they appear in their out most dry view.



Fig1.2

Things change a bit when we look closer for example at fig1.2, the light doesn't seem to be so accidental and the girl posing in the picture seems to be somehow conscious of the action that is taking place. In fig1.1 we might feel we have a less elaborated picture, a more accidental one, but in reality the photographer has captured a precise moment from this woman, a moment that surely favors her on her looks, we find the perfection in which she holds her cigarette, feeling almost like joining her in the pleasure of smoking. We also see in fig1.1 that the city is not just any city, but a

familiar city, details in architecture, the reflection on the window give away the idea that we are in NY. That comes even more evident when we look into fig1.2, the background although blurred by the lens, is still quite recognizable, the food wagon in the back posts a sign that reads “Tribeca” a known neighborhood in NY.

Even do fig1.1 can still be quite encapsulated as a straight ‘descriptive photograph’, essentially for its objective like distant nature, fig1.2 has a complete different feel to it. If we try to look at it not only as a ‘window’ but also as a ‘mirror’ and in a way as an ‘interpretative photograph’, an image of the photographer’s fantasy, we encounter a whole other depth of interpretation. This young girl stands perfectly on the frame and we feel suspicious to think this was an accident; the light on her face and the way the background diffuses so softly as it extends, brings us in a sort of romantic mood with the whole place. We feel we are no longer only in NY, but in a special place in some long gone city, a place where this almost ‘angelical blonde girl’ has stopped accidentally to look at us in her outmost innocent persona, caught of guard, getting some money out of her wallet, aloof on her way somewhere... it just happened that the photographer was there!

Clearly these images praise fashion culture and consumerism, viewers dig daily for the their photographic input to compare their fashion statements to those presented for them on the blog, this informational blog also serves as advertisement of brands and lifestyles.

Maurizio Cattelan for Toilet Paper Magazine, the most recent collaboration between italian artists Maurizio Cattelan and photographer Pierpaolo Ferrari has resulted in a self-proclaimed new generation magazine by the name of “Toile Paper”.



Fig 2.1

Cattelan's photographs can be clearly seen as 'mirrors', essentially because of their constructed nature, or what is referred to as 'tableau photography', meaning there is a deliberate message to be transmitted when the image is designed and later made. They also fit in the categories of 'interpretative photographs' and 'aesthetically evaluative photographs'; since issues of aesthetical qualities in images are being discussed and conceptual representations are deliberately build inside the photographs.

In fig 2.1 we see a simple image of what appears to be a live flying expressionless horse against a blue sky, the background doesn't tell us much from where the image is situated, and there is nothing else going on. That already puts us in a position of disorientation, when we as spectators look for clues on readability and try to interpret the image to get some sense. A similar issue arises with fig 2.2, where we see a nicely dressed Asian man in front of a wall, we don't know if this is in a studio or a location outside, his whole body expression is ambiguous. The man has a knife stabbed on himself, his face is sweating but he appears to be calm, we sense that the scene is fake just like in the previous image (fig 2.1), but still some sense of the real permeates our perception and we feel at odds with the images when we want try to pinpoint exactly what or who they meant are for. The clean and depurated aesthetic in the composition and the lighting, and the overall sharpness of the images indicates as well that these

images were taken with the most care and precision, everything seems to be in its place.



Fig 2.2

Clearly these sinister and cynical images are about something else, rather than what meets the eye on the surface; are they meant to be art pieces? Or are they just eye candy? Cynicism is a characteristic of the contemporary individual, especially in a world that has stripped all truths and exhausted all major discourses; the only way a conscious individual can surpass madness and function in society with all the incongruencies that occur around him, is by nourishing the cynic that lives inside him. Maybe these images are conceptual fuel for that posture, being cynical allows the individual to tolerate everything, while at the same time incites the individual to proclaim his individuality as the only antidote for a reasonable existence. A 'maximized' individual is of course the ultimate goal of capitalism, a system where the 'super individual' only finds redemption through consumption.

*Simon Norfolk, Simon Norfolk was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1963 and educated in England, finishing at Oxford and Bristol Universities with a degree in philosophy and sociology.

Norfolk's photographs are a clear and distorted mix of what 'mirrors' that look like 'windows' or about 'windows' that look like 'mirrors' look like. His images could also fit into the different categories of Barrett's method. I will enumerate the following:

- 'Explanatory photographs' in the sense that they clearly want to tell us of a specific place, time and historical situation.
- 'Interpretative photographs' because it is clear that the photographer is looking for a number of esthetical elements to construct his images, not just to tell and objective story, but to tell his own story.
- 'Ethically evaluative photographs', comes readily obvious that a political standpoint is taken, and that the images seek to establish a profound social consideration.
- 'Aesthetically evaluative photographs', in the sense that a new sense of estheticism is proposed for the documentary photograph, amazingly beautiful pictures can tell a horrible story. In that line we also encounter Salgado and a whole bunch of Magnum photographers for example.



Fig 3.1

In both of the images the photographer has aided himself with the use of a variety of photographing techniques to enhance his photographs. Their compositions are perfectly arranged, the decisive moment is captured, the contextual setting of the pictures tells us the importance of their historical moment, the characters that pose

before us seem just ‘too right’ as they fill our emotions with pity and awe for their tragedy in this postwar aftermath.



Fig. 3.2

As referred to before, we can hardly understand how our senses perceive the sublime through these photographs, not that the photographs are sublime as objects, but that the story they carry with them is. It puts us in an odd moral position when we enjoy looking at the beauty of these images when we know the horror that they are embedded with. It truly makes one wonder if this is the only way we can access horrible issues, through beautifying and altering their true nature according to the purpose we see more fit. In a sense and in most cases documentary photography has been characteristically recognizable for being opportunistic in portraying the misery of others.

We make beautiful images because we know others like them, others will appreciate and applaud them. We also know beauty is an easy pill to digest, and in photography this aesthetical approach is insatiable, no matter how many proposals have arisen from the postmodern artistic production, in order to propose different ways of looking at aestheticism, we as photographers tend to cling fearfully to beauty, to ‘pretty things’, in order to construct our stories. Photographs have to be ‘pretty’ to be successful; being pretty is good enough, just like Barbie, because no one cares if she is stupid or doing nasty things, as long as she remains pretty. We don’t care to see images of the world in total collapse, as long as those images are beautiful and give us pleasure.

Conclusion

It appears that one of the greatest powers that the photograph possesses, its is capacity to grab us so quickly into the message, but at the same time that it can also just toss us out of its charm with the same ease do to its frivolous nature. For that matter photography has become a fantastic medium for those that want to express quick and immediate messages, quickly produced and quickly disposed.

After concluding this analysis I most note that for me, utilizing the categories from Barrett and Szarkowski has been positive to a point, say a starting point, they in a way are too loose and open to too general of interpretations, maybe they made more sense then that they do now, now that photography has taken on to a whole new direction in production and distribution with the explosion of internet and the array of photographic devices, we must find newer ways of looking at our images.