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Psychology of image
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Photography & lies



OLD FAITHFUL GEYSER
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WYOMING 1942

Photograph by Ansel Adams

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People do not represent what they see through their eyes, but what they see with their mind.

It is commonly accepted that photography can be seen as a model of veracity and objectivity: "Any work of art reflects the personality of its creator," says the Encyclopedie francaise. "The photographic plate does not interpret. It records. Its precision and fidelity cannot be questioned." It is all too easy to show that this social representation is based on the false evidence of prejudice; in fact photography captures aspects of reality that are only ever the results of an arbitrary selection, and, consequently, of a transcription.

A photograph could be seen like a painting, when all is said and done. It reflects a little of the character of the person who takes the picture, and it has his own style.

Various photographs Photograph is a pictorial language. Words could be used to enlighten or corrupt and, therefore, photography could give form to noble thoughts or arouse cheap desires, it could share experience with other arts, it could describe feelings, objects and events, report events, send messages.

There are a lot of different kinds of photography that we divide, for practical purpose, in four main categories that I would like to analyze:

- utilitarian photography
- documentary photography
- creative photography
- communicative photography

Utilitarian photography In this kind of photography the usefulness of the picture is determined by the degree of objectivity. It is required a high degree of technical ingenuity to solve the often considerable technical problems. Typical examples of this kind of photography are the aerial photography taken for mapping, the microphotograph of books, the photojournalist and documentary or the X-ray photography. Their main aim is to record, and the photography is, in this case the best tool to obtain accuracy, clarity and objectivity.

Documentary photography According to Webster's documentary photography tries to "record or depict in artistic form a factual and authoritative presentation...of an event or a cultural phenomenon." The key-words of this definition are: factual and artistic. It means that the subject is factual but its rendition is artistic. In fact in a documentary photography, imaginative approach and creative-artistic presentation combine to render everyday subjects and events in a pictorial most effective form. The purpose is to provide what basically amounts to informative and education record. Examples are the political and news photographs, the type of picture that we can see in the magazine, the naturalistic photography. It is interesting to consider a problem arose within the last few years with the development of the computer graphics. Now, in fact, it is possible to make montages that are practically indistinguishable from the "real" photos using "cheap" computer and common software. This fact could create political problem (everyone could publish embarrassing images to create diplomatic incident) and could be unable to use photos as proofs.

Creative photography. In contrast with the documentary photography this kind is basically descriptive, dealing with specific facts and events. Creative photography is interpretative and symbolic. The subject is generally no more than a vehicle that carries the idea or the message that photographer wants to express. The ideas, the messages and the scopes of the photographer can be numerous and very different from one another. Someone can make pictures as a poor form of art or may try to give a moral message or to persuade a man to buy that car. But in each case photography will be free to change the reality how it wants to

Communicative photography. It is a socially committed kind of photography, well integrated and socially accepted as vehicle of truth or potential realities. Oliviero Toscani, one of the most famous contemporary Italian photographer, says that the persons who take pictures have not to cover their eyes with the camera but they have to hold it in the mind, because otherwise they become blind. Toscani, attending to Benetton's advertising campaign, has created in the last years a new way to "make publicity." Advertising can be a mean to communicate a message, also strong, often shocking, a message that changes the reality to represent it better, outside from the normal advertising of falsehood and beauty. I would like to place the advertising photography in a separate category because I think that the creative aspect is subordinated to the communicative aspect. The advertising photography is certainly

creative and the creative may be communicative as well, but the purposes are very different and so are the levels of freedom under which photographers work.

Photography & art. Vincent Van Gogh wrote:” I still can find no better definition for the word art than this: nature, reality, truth; but with a significance, a conception, a character which the artist has to bring out in it and to which he has to give expression; which he disentangles and makes free and clears up.”

Compared to the fine arts, photography is such a relatively new medium that it is still difficult to assign it a place in a proper relation to the others craft. In photography the linkage with the technical aspects is much more strong than the other arts and an important part of the artistic opportunities of photography are due to technical-scientific contribution. The mechanics of the camera, the optic of the lens, the chemistry of photographic emulsions and developer contribute, limit and, at the same time, widen the photographer’s possibility to draw his picture. The consequence of all this is a form of art that continually expands itself, following the technological growth, and also contributing in the technology research. The new developings of photography are now following the informatic way that offers new, incredible possibilities. It is already possible to watch and to manipulate the pictures through the computer, to substitute the film with the cd-rom, to send or to receive pictures using Internet or portables telephones, and this may occurs everywhere in the world.

The camera. A camera is of course a mechanical instrument but not substantially different from the brush of the painter or the pen of the novelist. The camera is the medium to impress, in the best way, the film that, developed and printed will give us the photos. These photos can be much different from the reality from what they are taken, and the photographer has many possibilities to realise this. First we must say that however, then also when we do not want, the photos are a deformation of the reality. They are in only two dimension, without deep, they are sometimes in black & white and even if they are in colours these colours will be deformed by the kind of light, by the kind of film and a lot of other little chemical and physical reasons. Secondary the photos are still, they are frozen instants of movement. These characteristics are inside the photos. Of course photographer can be able to make a picture with an unnatural light or with the most appropriate film, but he will never be able to make a picture of something in movement. This to say that photographer, as the other artists, has to

follow his medium's limits, to know them, and to move inside these confines to create what he has in his mind.

The camera offers the possibility to make a painting drawn by the light. The photographer's task is to decide the frame of the piece of world that will be impressed on the film and how he wants that it will be represented. He can choose it changing the position of the camera and the width of the lens. He can play with light, making at midday a picture that it seems taken at night, or colouring everything of red or green. With a wide FF-stop he can focus only a particular of the scene, with a long time of exposure he can give us the sensation of movement. The different kinds of brightness make different the same object, so, even if there are millions of photos of the Big Ben, no one will be equal to another.

These are only a few examples of the technical possibilities of a camera, only to explain that the camera really leaves to us enough freedom to create art works.

The photomontage. Probably it represents the maximum example of manipulation of reality. The manipulation of images is as old as the photography itself (it was born in 1915) and permits one further alteration of the world captured by the camera. In the photomontage the reality remains outside the darkroom and the photographer's freedom to create something of new from more different picture becomes a poor form of art and communication. The photomontage is in fact used above all in the field of advertising and propaganda. This probably because the pictures are commonly considered "true", then the message that comes out from these photos becomes very strong and effective.

The second perception. Umberto Eco says that photography is like perception and I think that it could be a very stimulating point to discuss. The perception is the process by which the information from our senses is received by us and it is a way to give sense to the reality. In the perception only our senses separate us from the reality of the objects. Using a camera we put another filter in front of our mind, a filter that has very particular characteristics and sometimes quite similar to our eyes.

Photography & people. Photography represents the most common and simple form of art. Everyone is able to take a camera and take a picture a picture that probably will have technical problems or that simply will not communicate anything. But this picture, also with every the imaginable problem, will be a representation of a piece of world, a piece of world that a man wanted to fix in a little piece of paper forever.

My photography. I began to take a picture around six years ago and from that moment my manner to see the world has changed, even if I don not have my camera with me. This phenomenon, that I noticed also in others persons, is really interesting. It means that the camera is entered in my mind and it has changed my perception of the environment, adding a new possibility, that is a new interpretation of the outside world and a new perception of all its elements. The question of how certain scenes would look in a photo, become automatic and became internal. I have never thought that the pictures should represent the real world, because I only care of representing my own vision of the world. When I take pictures I try to size carefully all the basic and technical functions in order to control the camera and its results, yet it has happened several time that the pictures I took turned out completely different than what I thought they would be, creating sometimes frustration or sometimes great pleasure. The main difference between photography and the other fine arts is that the former has an aura of “mystery” and waiting excitement that is not typical of other artistic activities. Photography is one of best system to create images, to communicate informations about ourselves, to understand a world that becomes, as in a witchcraft, still, on our hands.

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