DO PHOTOGRAPHS DEPICT REALITY?

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of photography, its relationship with reality has been never been settled. There has always been a debate whether photographs are representations of reality or not. This debate further intensified with the digitalization of photography. Photography's association with reality stood threatened due to the use of digital manipulation by photographers. The present article focuses on this strained relationship between the two and attempts to strike a middle ground in the midst of the extreme viewpoints surrounding photography on the issue of its relation to reality.

Key Words: Photography, Reality, Representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Photography has been hailed since its birth for its evidentiary qualities and its ability to depict reality. Photography has been believed to be a true record of reality and its objective representation. It is this quality of photography that has continued to fascinate us over the last 150 years, still continues to do so. Stressing on the evidentiary qualities of photography, Susan Sontag says that, “photographs, “furnish evidence” and a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened [01]. Annette Kuhn & Kirsten Emiko McAllister also press on photography’s strength as a proof of something that has occurred in reality, “as a visual medium, the photograph has many culturally resonant properties that it shares with no other medium. Above all, the photograph is widely held to be a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at sometime, somewhere in the time and place in front of the camera”[02].

Many great theorists like Andre Bazin, John Berger, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Arnheim have unquestioningly supported the belief in the capacity of the camera to represent reality. The supporters of photographic realism, advocated photography to be an objective form of representation because of the lack of human involvement of the photographer and his subjectivity.

Andre Bazin in his early essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image (1945)” professes that, man’s innate desire to reproduce reality with minimal human intervention lead to the birth of photography. This is evident from Bazin’s following statement: “For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” [03].

According to Bazin the lack of involvement of the photographer is responsible for the truthful representation through the medium of photography as compared to paintings. He says, “All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence” [04].
Similarly, Arnheim considers the minimal participation of the photographer as the reason behind the objective depiction through photography. He says: “What is uncanny about photography is that the picture materializes the moment the shutter is released, without any further involvement on the part of the photographer. Neither the hand nor the eye needs to do anything else. And since the participation of the camera seems so substantial, and that of the human being so minimal, one hesitates to call the outcome of this process “a photograph,” should this be taken to refer to something created by humans”[05].

Susan Sontag also follows the same line of thought and suggests that photography enjoys a privileged position as compared to other forms of representation because the act of photography is independent of the subjective influence of the photographer. “Photography has powers that no other image-system has ever enjoyed because, unlike the earlier ones, it is not dependent on an image maker. However carefully the photographer intervenes in setting up and guiding the image-making process, the process itself remains an optical-chemical (or electronic) one, the workings of which are automatic, the machinery for which will inevitably be modified to provide still more detailed and, therefore, more useful maps of the real”[06].

Roland Barthes an ardent believer of photographic realism argues that photography can be considered as a truthful representation of reality owing to its physical characteristics. Barthes says “Every photograph is a certificate of presence. Photography offers an immediate presence to the world— a co-presence; but this presence is not only of a political order (“to participate by the image in contemporary events”), it is also of a metaphysical order”[07].

Barthes believes that the photographic realism is based on the physical and chemical process that occurs in the act of photography: Roland Barthes declares: ‘[it] is at the intersection of two quite distinct procedures; one of a chemical order: the action of light on certain substances; the other of a physical order: the formation of an image through an optical device’[08].

Rudolf Arnheim in his 1974 essay entitled On the Nature of Photography also bases his argument on the "mechanical" origin of photographic images.

“All I have said derives ultimately from the fundamental peculiarity of the photographic medium: the physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light. Because of this fundamental peculiarity, photographs have "an authenticity from which painting is barred by birth"[09].

In his book, Camera Lucida, Barthes dwells and builds on the idea of photographic realism. Roland Barthes supports the belief in photography being a true representation of reality. Barthes claims that "photography never lies: or it can lie as to the meaning of the thing...never to its existence [10].

The quality of indexicality of photographs differentiates them from other forms of representation. A photograph is not a mere resemblance of its object rather it is the trace of the object. Like Barthes, Susan Sontag also believes that photography enjoys a privileged position of authenticity as compared to other images. She says, “The images that have virtually unlimited authority in modern society are mainly photographic images; and their scope and authority stems from properties peculiar to images taken by the camera. Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.”[11].

John Berger also considers photographs to be traces of reality. He says that, “Unlike any
other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way that a photograph does.”[12].

Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag share the belief that the photograph is a true reproduction of reality. Barthes and Sontag believe that only photography can boost of an evidential force which no other form of art can, because photograph is an evidence of something that was indeed present before the lens of the camera. The congruence in their views is evident from the following statement:

“The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceeded radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” [13].

In his analysis of photography, Roland Barthes noted that photographs, unlike every other type of image, can never be divorced from their referents. Photograph and referent are glued together [14]. For Barthes photographs are casually connected to their referents. The former testifies the presence of the latter. Roland Barthes writes:

“The photographic referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call the 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and most often are 'chimeras.' Contrary to imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition of reality and the past” [15].

Barthes advocated that the indisputable quality of photography to depict the truth results from the fact, that camera records what is present before the lens, the reality as it transpired in actuality, it is not a pigment in the imagination of the photographer. The idea of the indisputable quality of the photographs to depict reality was carried forward by the second generation theorists like Roger Scruton, Kendall Walton, and Scott Walden.

Roger Scruton contends that, an ideal photograph "represents" its subject by reproduction of its appearance. It is not as an interpretation of reality but a true presentation of things as they appear in actuality. He goes as far as saying that, “looking at a photograph is a substitute for looking at the thing itself” [16].

Scott Walden & Kendall Walton put forward the idea that the lack of photographer’s mental state involvement makes photography an objective medium of representation as compared to other processes of image making, where the mental state of the image maker lends the subjective character to the representation of reality [17, 18].

While the realists supported the idea of reality being arrested in the photograph to be the ultimate truth, there was an equally vehement degree of opposition to this belief from theorists like Goodman and Snyder who opposed the idea of photographic truth.

Goodman and Snyder affirm that photography is no more inherently tied to the real than are painting, drawing, or, for that matter, language. Rather, photography is merely another way of constructing, ordering, and communicating meaning, and relies just as much on convention and construction as do other media [19].
With the advent of the digital technology the history of photography witnessed a huge transformation and the suspicion regarding the photographic truth grew stronger. The shift from analogue to digital technology facilitated the process of digital manipulation that raised questions about photography’s quality to depict reality. Victor Burgin explains this suspicion as follows “As there are no original negatives to verify the truth of the image, the challenging idea of a photographic copy that has no original has circulated widely over the past decades [20].

With digital technology, it is arguably easier to edit and create images of objects that never existed in reality, thus casting doubt on the reliability of photography’s connection to the real. Scott Walden questions the objectivity of the digital images. He says that, “analog images more easily facilitate the generation of thoughts that are true, thus increasing the viewer’s confidence in the truth value of the images themselves. He doesn’t deny that digital images can also leave the veracity of our thoughts unscathed. But it will be much more difficult for the viewer to have confidence in such thoughts because it is much more complex to verify the degree of objective, mechanical creation of digital images than that of analog images [21].

Fred Ritchin blames digital technology for the raising doubt about the photographic truth. He remarks that digital interventions undermine photography’s supposed inherently truthful status, and have thus come to herald the death of analog photography’s most specific hallmark [22]. Ritchin laments that computer-imaging practices signal “the end of photography as we have known it” and suggests that digitalization of photography technology raises a suspicion about photography’s ability of truthful depiction at the basic level of fact [23].

There are some theorists who believe that the whole idea of a photographic truth is a farce. One of them being W.J.T. Mitchell, who claims that “the concept of the ‘genuine’ image as a natural, unmanipulated entity is an ideological phantasm” [24]. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that, “Even within the most narrowly defined straight photography, which has often come to be understood as a norm against which to test manipulative deviations [25], it is common knowledge that it takes a lot of mediation by the photographer at various stages of the making process of the image.

W.J.T. Mitchell’s views are supported by American photographer and critic Martha Rosler, who declares that manipulation has been integral to photography from its very beginnings. In her essay entitled “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations” (1989), she points out that the success of digital developments within photography are the logical consequence of a cultural imperative to create perfectly tricked pictures, rather than vice versa[26].

Manovich has asserted that ‘Digital technology does not subvert "normal" photography because "normal" photography never existed’[27]. Retouching and manipulation have always been inherent to the dynamics of photography [28].

Geoffrey Batchen also argues that photography is nothing if not a history of manipulated images [29]. Geoffrey Batchen echoes Mitchell and Rosler views when he remarks that the production of any and every photograph involves intervention and manipulation [30].

2. CONCLUSION

A balanced way to approach the question of reality and photography requires that we question the objectivity of the photographer who created a particular image. The perquisite for a photograph to be a representation of reality rests on the fact that the photographer who clicked it kept his prejudices at bay and became a witnesses and not a spectator. This thought can best be summed up in Ritchin’s words, who says that “the value of the photographic image in a digital age would not
be secured by tracing its truthfulness to its origins in a photo-chemical process. Rather, it must rest on the conscience and reputation of the photographer who made the image. Overall, Ritchin cast the difficulty for photojournalism in a digital age as a largely personal and ethical problem - a problem for individual photographers and picture editors as they were pitched into a situation where truth and integrity became ever harder to defend against what he saw as an inherently unscrupulous and deceitful digital technology”.

3. REFERENCES

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Certificate of Participation

This is to certify that Ms. / Mr. / Dr. / Prof. POOJA SHARMA was an invited Speaker / Chaired a Session / Participated / Presented a Paper "Photography and use of gratification: A multiple case study of photographers" in the International Conference held at Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.

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Uses & Gratification: Multiple Case Study Analysis of Photographers

Introduction: Images have always arrested human imagination, be it the primitive man, living in the caves who communicated through cave paintings or the modern man who is constantly bombarded with numerous visual messages everyday. What is it about an image that has captured the fancy of human mind? This is the question that the present paper attempts to explore. This paper will focus primarily on photographs, which have come to dominate the visual communication field.

Photographs have become an indispensable part of our lives. They are so imbedded in our day to day life that we fail to take notice. We have rather started to take them for granted. The question that the present research paper aims to explore is, why do we click photographs? What drives us or motivates us to take pictures? What kind of satisfaction we derive from clicking pictures? The present paper uses the Uses and Gratification Perspective to study the degree and nature of need gratification that photographers experience from clicking photographs.

The uses and gratification theory is an axiomatic theory that examines media behaviours from the audience member’s point of view. U & G theory allows for the examination of what people do with media, their underlying motives and consequences of that use. The assumption is that people use a given media to satisfy certain needs and reward their use. This theory seeks to explain / predict five things: psychological needs that help shape why people use the media and that motivate people to engage in media – use behaviours to derive gratifications to fulfill intrinsic needs within confines of a socio-political environment.

In recent years, the role and function of western digital photography seem to have changed substantially. In the analogue age, personal photography was first and foremost a means for autobiographical remembering, and photographs usually ended up as keepsakes in someone’s (family) album or shoebox. They were typically regarded to be a person’s most reliable aid for recall and for verifying ‘life as it was,’ even if we know
that imagination, projection, and remembrance are inextricably bound up in the process of remembering (Stuhlmiller, 1996). Photography’s functions as a tool for identity formation and as a means for communication were duly acknowledged, but were always rated secondary to its prime purpose of memory (Sontag 1973; Barthes, 1981). Recent research by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists seems to suggest that the increased deployment of digital cameras—including cameras integrated in other communication devices—favors the functions of communication and identity formation at the expense of photography’s use as a tool for remembering. (Harrison, 2002; Schiano, Chen and Isaacs, 2002; Gary and Gerrie, 2005).

When personal photography came of age in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it gradually emerged as a social practice that revolved around families wanting to save their memories of past experiences in material pictorial forms for future reference or communal reminiscing. Yet from the early days of photography, we could already distinguish social uses complementary to its primary function. Photography always also served as an instrument of communication and as a means to share experience. Notwithstanding the dominance of photography as a family tool for remembrance and reminisce, the other functions were immanent to photography from the moment it became popular as a domestic technology. In recent years, we can see profound shifts in the balance between these various social uses: from family to individual use, from memory tools to communication devices, and from sharing (memory) objects to sharing experiences.

Over the past two decades, the individual has gradually become the nucleus of pictorial life. The older group generally adheres to the primacy of photography as a memory tool, particularly in the construction of family life, whereas teenagers and young adults use camera-like tools for conversation and peer-group building.

**Review of Literature:** Richard Chalfen was among the first to study consumer photography digital technologies: cameras and cameraphones. Studies of cameraphone technology—often focused on photographs in the context of mobile messaging (MMS, for example) and mobile blogging (also called ‘moblogging’)—have found that digital systems afford both old and new practices. For examples, cameraphones have been
appropriated to support home mode-esque storytelling. However, Okabe and Ito found that cameraphone users elevate otherwise ordinary objects and events to “photo-worthy” occurrances; echoing Makela et al.’s and Kurvinen’s findings that cameraphone photos were used to tell stories with images, rather than about images as with the home mode. Other researchers also find an emphasis on telling stories with images. For example, Van House et al. identified a variety of communicative uses of cameraphone photos, including self-expression and self-presentation. Kindberg et al.’s taxonomy of image capture practices lay out similar communicative forms, many of which are strikingly different than those practiced in the home mode of communication examined by Chalfen. In other words, these devices seem to lend themselves to a different sort of photographic communication—one that involves telling stories with images.

Researchers have also studied the adoption and use “traditional,” standalone digital cameras. Again, these studies find both traditional, ‘home mode’, and new practices. For example, the work of Frohlich et al. and Crabtree et al. echo the earlier findings of Chalfen, emphasizing the continued importance of gathering around a presenter who narrates the photo story (an activity that Chalfen labeled “exhibition events”). Both of these studies, along with findings from Kirk et al., found continued reliance on the printed photograph as a photo-sharing object. Even images that began as digital files were often printed purposely to support sharing and story-telling showing one potential challenge to incorporating digital systems in home mode.

**Methodology:** The data in this paper derives from multiple case study analysis of two types of photographers: the professionals and the amateurs. Amateur photographers are those who do not depend on photography for financial gain, they pursue photography as a hobby. Whereas professional photographers make a living out of photography; they rely on photography as a source of livelihood. Judgement sampling was used to select the sample of study.

In – depth interviews with 12 photographers were conducted in cities of Chandigarh, Panchkula & Mohali. Photographers from both categories i.e. the amateurs and the
professional were interviewed. The photographers ranged from the age group of 25 to 65 years. There were two females and 10 males. A qualitative analysis of the interviews was done to arrive at conclusions.

A 5 point Likert scale was used to study need gratification derived from photography. The five types of need gratification: Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal integrative needs, Social integrative and Escapist needs were studied. Each need gratification category was tested on the basis of 5 statements to which the subject had to respond in terms of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

Findings

Cognitive Needs

Almost all the photographers exhibited Q4 scores with regard to the satisfaction of their cognitive needs. Out of the 12 photographers only two amateur photographers displayed Q3 scores with regard to the satisfaction they derived from photography. Photographers from both categories seem to agree to the statements like: photography adds to knowledge & information, helps in understanding the world around, helps in satiating curiosity about things, helps in self-educating, and helps to discover and explore new things. The photographers resonated the view that they derive great satisfaction from photography as a means a source of information, knowledge, education, exploration and discovery.

Affective Needs

All the photographers displayed Q4 scores, except two photographers, one photo-journalist and an amateur photographer who exhibited Q3 scores, with regard to gratification of their affective needs. All photographers seem to agree that photography enables expression of emotions, gives pleasure, satiates aesthetic sensibilities, helps deal with loneliness and acts a source of entertainment too. All photographers established that their affective needs stand gratified due to photography.
Personal Integrative needs
Nine photographers exhibited Q4 scores with regard to the gratification of their personal integrative needs whereas only three photographers displayed Q3 scores. Majority of the photographers strongly supported the idea that photography helps in self introspection & catharsis, generating self confidence, feeling more powerful, and reinforces personal values.

Social Integrative Needs
Eight photographers displayed Q4 scores, three photographers displayed Q3 scores. Whereas there was one amateur photographer who displayed a Q2 score. While analyzing the responses to the statement in this need gratification category, it was clear that a significant number of photographers believed that photography helps in communicating & strengthening bond with family, friends and society, generating feeling of self- esteem and social prestige, identifying with others and generating a feeling of belonging, helps in making friends, being liked, included and accepted by other people. Photography brings people closer & unites them for a common cause.

Escapist Needs
Eight photographers displayed a Q 4 score with regards the gratification of their escapist needs through photography while three displayed Q3 scores. One photo – journalist displayed a Q 2 score. A majority of them seemed to agree that photography provides an opportunity to explore fantasies, acts as a breather and gives personal space, provides a much needed contrast to routine activities, helps to forget tensions and problems and provides a legitimate excuse to be productively occupied.

Conclusion: All categories of photographers derive need gratification from photography. There is a high degree of need gratification of the cognitive and affective needs of photographers from all categories. The degree of satisfaction derived from photography with regards to the personal and social need gratification is relatively less as compared to the cognitive and affective needs. But this difference in the degree is slight. Although a significant number of photographers claimed to derive high degree of escapist need
gratification. But the degree of satisfaction derived by the photographers with regards to their escapist need gratification was least as compared to the other need gratification categories. The results indicate that photography still continues to be a preferred medium because it helps in deriving satisfaction in all the five areas of need gratification.

References

