

# Why photography has a presence in every part of the world

[Design](#), [Photography](#)



Oppression, defined as prolonged cruel or unjust treatment, and systems of oppression are inherent in this world and always have been. For centuries, mankind had desensitized himself to all sorts of atrocities, things like slavery, unjust war, racism and sexism. Most manifestations of oppression are large scale operations that focus on a particular social group, frequently based on race, faith or gender. However, I am interested in forms of oppression that transcend this trend. Since it would be less useful (though not less necessary) to study smaller forms of oppression, I instead wish to investigate forms of oppression that are not limited racial, religious or sexual issues. Basically, I want to know what forms of oppression have the least limited scope in regards to who it affects. It seems that there are two types of oppression that are not based off of gender or faith. First, the oppression of a population of people, by its own government or another. The second is the oppression and exploitation of the masses of the lower class by the few people of the higher class. The similarity between these two is that it involves individuals taking advantage of groups of people for their own personal gain and indeed, in real life these forms of oppression are commonly intertwined. To me this almost worse than racism, sexism, or religious bias, which stem from ignorance and intolerance and are therefore easy to explain and ignore. In her essay, "In Plato's Cave," Susan Sontag discusses photography and its omnipresent nature, which she describes as aggression. Basically, because of its widespread use, photography has made a watered down version of any experience for anyone to experience. Sontag describes this as an aggression, but I see it more like the oppression of experience. Instead of being encouraged to have experiences, we are

encouraged to look at photographs of somebody else's experience, usually by whoever is selling those photographs. This is the oppression of experience. Robert Scholes' essay, "On Reading a Video Text" discusses these concepts in relation to advertisements. Basically, corporations today are able to sell their product by reinforcing cultural ideals that their consumers share. Shekhar Deshpande, in his essay "The Confident Gaze" discusses essentially this same concept in relation to National Geographic. He criticizes the magazine for being willing to photograph human suffering and then sell that picture to rich Americans for entertainment. Together, the information presented by these authors lead me to my thesis. The ability to manipulate images and video is often utilized by large-scale corporations in order to deceive their customers regarding company ideologies; although this can be accomplished in many ways, advertisement, both on television and in magazines, is by far the most common.

Sontag's discussion of photography's aggression in her essay, "In Plato's Cave" serves as the introductory basis of my argument. She first criticizes the passive, ubiquitous nature of photography that causes it to inherently "capture the largest possible number of subjects" (242); this, Sontag states, is photography's aggression. She claims that nowadays photography is practiced as amusement, much like sex or dancing, and this has caused it become a social activity, rather than an art form. She criticizes the effects of this, stating that it takes away from the validity of any given experience, because people focus and care just as much about taking photographs as they do about the actual experience. In Sontag's own words, "It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken

and are cherished" (242-3). In this quote, Sontag discusses the tendency of families to keep photo albums as reassurance of their connectedness, rather than simply enjoying the experience of familial love as it exists in interpersonal reactions. It seems that these people consider it as important to record an experience as it is to participate in the experience or, as Sontag puts it, they enjoy converting experience into a single image, like a souvenir. I believe this has lead people to have an emotional expectation of photographs; that is, when most people look at a photograph, they expect to have an emotional response, because they have they expectation they are being shown the image for a certain reason. This comes from the assumption that the image contains something interesting or powerful, something worth recording, or else why would it exist? Robert Scholes, in his essay " On Reading a Video Text" discusses why people react to videos in certain ways and I think the answers he reveals can just as easily be connected to still images.

Scholes' essay, " On Reading a Video Text," discusses specific reasons that readers react strongly to video texts, particularly in the context of advertisement. He quickly identifies two predominant factors: narrativity and cultural reinforcement. He defines narrativity as " the pleasures and powers associated with the reception of stories presented in video texts" and cultural reinforcement as " the process through which video texts confirm viewers in their ideological positions and reassure them as their membership in a collective cultural body" (204). For Scholes, these two concepts are closely connected, because the narrative in video texts is almost always

designed to inspire cultural reinforcement in viewers. His essay is based off an analysis of Budweiser beer commercial, which tells the story of a black umpire rising through the ranks of baseball, offering a cultural reinforcement of the American dream, the sanctity of baseball, and all things American. Meanwhile, Budweiser attaches their name to the video text, signifying that they and their customers are part of the American tradition. As Scholes says, "To accept the pleasure of this text is to believe that America works... Does the text also sell Budweiser? This is something only market research can tell. But it surely sells the American way first and then seeks to sell its brand of beer by establishing a metonymic connection between the product and the nation" (206). The power of narrativity and cultural reinforcement transcends the context in which Scholes' discusses it. Although it is not as easy as in a video text, both narrativity and cultural reinforcement can be accomplished in still image, and probably all media. Although narrative is harder to create in an image and usually tells a shorter story, it is possible. More importantly, cultural reinforcement is just as easily accomplished. For example, Dos Equis beer advertisement displays their "Most Interesting Man in the World" character drinking at a bar, surrounded by good looking people. Above him, a caption, italicized for class, states, "The Most Interesting Man in the World on Barstools: I have done some of my best thinking on barstools and about barstools." The narrativity comes from the story of "The Most Interesting Man" and his apparent time spent drinking in bars, clearly a lot. The cultural reinforcement is that of drinking as a sophisticated act. If the most interesting man in the world has done of his "best thinking" while drinking in bars, then why shouldn't the rest of us? The

ad aims to re-convince their viewers that drinking is a healthy and sophisticated practice. This ability to manipulate cultural reinforcement is the main source of power for corporations to oppress the middle and lower classes of America.

The state of advertisement nowadays, on television and in all media, is driven by the idea that cultural reinforcement of certain ideals will sell their product, even if their company's ideology does not actually match their customers. As Scholes mentions, one of the most common of these ideals is the American dream. However, there are limitless ideologies to appeal to in the American consumer base and currently companies abuse this knowledge by deceiving customers into thinking their ideologies match. The beer advertisements mentioned previously, both Scholes' Budweiser commercial and the Dos Equis magazine ad, are perfect examples of this. In the Budweiser commercial, the company tries to label their beer as "American," by showing it being drunk by different members of Major League baseball. Even though they are an American company, Budweiser is deceitful to their customers by creating this connection between the "American way" and their product, because they do not advertise the quality or ingredients of the beer, but rather social factors to which they hope their customers respond. In the same way, the Dos Equis magazine ad tries to classify drinking as sophisticated act, when a study of the bodies response to alcohol. However, it is common knowledge that common effects of alcohol are loss of brain cells, balance and coordination; the sight of somebody is truly intoxicated by alcohol is far from sophisticated. These examples show that some companies

rely on deception within their advertisements instead of trying to market their companies in some other way. However, this trend transcends just beer companies and tends to include most large-scale corporation; the companies one sees on TV and in magazines.

For example, let's consider the powerful company Coca-Cola; they have lots of capital to invest and a vested interest in attaining more customers. The only problem is that, because its a popular drink and everyone has tried it, everybody who likes Coke already knows they like Coke. So its not worth it for Coca-Cola to try to advertise to people who do not know about their product; the target audience is too small and for the most part, will know about Coke soon enough anyways. Instead, Coca-Cola releases commercials that aim to convince people who knowingly don't drink Coke that they are missing out. Fortunately for them, they can accomplish this in almost unlimited ways, thanks to the ease of manipulating photographs and videos. For example, in a 2012 Coca-Cola commercial entitled "Holidays are Coming," they show a chain of Coke trucks decorated with Christmas images, mainly Santa. In this, they are trying to instil in the viewers that Coke is intrinsically tied to Christmas and they will disappoint themselves and the people around them if they do not buy Coke during the holidays. In another 2012 commercial (both commercials are available on YouTube) called "100 Year Old Man Shares the Secret to Happiness," an old man discusses what makes him happy, family and friends, while the signs around him display Coke advertisements and the people around him drink Coke. In this commercial, they are trying to connect Coke with family ideals, so that

people who wish for longevity and value their families will see Coke as a part of their lifestyle. However, the hypocrisy here is obvious. Coca-Cola is not a healthy drink and does not contribute to longevity in life. The website, [killercoke.org](http://killercoke.org), perfectly describes Coca-Cola's hypocrisy,

Phosphoric Acid in Coca-Cola and Diet Coke has been shown to destroy bones by contributing to osteoporosis and destroying teeth. Aspartame... has been linked to numerous diseases and health problems. In addition, there are food dyes and other chemical additives in Coke products that are known carcinogens. Due to the mass marketing and consumption of Coke products, millions are addicted to these products due to the caffeine, sugar and aspartame. ([killercoke.org/health\\_issues.php](http://killercoke.org/health_issues.php))

Especially in the context of the "100 Years of Happiness" video, Coca-Cola's deceptive nature is clear.

Advertising is not the only way in which images and videos can be used to oppress a people. There are many corporations (magazines, television companies, most media) that specifically sell images and/or video texts. Even outside the context of advertisement, video and images can be manipulated to make them more saleable, regardless if this has a negative effect on the customers. In his essay, "The Confident Gaze," Shekhar Deshpande discusses National Geographic and the impact of the magazine on the world. Basically, he claims that National Geographic and the style it brings to its publication create an us-and-them feeling between the Western world and the rest of the world. To this extent, Deshpande states, "While we



admire the accomplishments of its photographers to bring us the rest of the world, we forget that the photographs and the contexts in which they are placed represent a very conscious effort by the editors to make the world a happy place and a happy place especially for the Western eye” (55).

Deshpande is essentially saying that although its easy to enjoy the images in National Geographic, it is important to understand what a selective process each image went through before the magazine decided it was just perfect for its readers to see. Although National Geographic presents itself as educational, it can be just as deceptive as any magazine, photograph or video text. This is because National Geographic has as much reason as anybody else to deceive their customers, to sell their product. In her essay, Sontag normally discusses photography being oppressive to the photographed individual, but in this case, I think National Geographic is oppressive to both the photographed individual and the viewer of the photo. Because National Geographic presents themselves as educational, but “attempts to sanitize and universalize the uncomfortable as well as different elements of other countries” (55), they are deceiving their readers who believe they are getting a first hand look at how the world is. The end goal of this, for National Geographic and all media outlets, is to sell their product, but the result is a group of readers that are misguided and ethnocentric.

Oppression and systems of oppression are inherent within the world, but that does not mean they should be accepted, cultivated or propelled forward. It means they should be called to attention and eradicated. It is clear that large-scale corporations use the media and advertisements to sell their

product with false standards to unsuspecting customers. Obviously, the use of images and video cannot be removed entirely from our society. However, blatant abuses of power, such as companies like Coca-Cola and National Geographic using manipulative and deceitful advertisements to gain customers, can and should be limited. The problem is, the structure whose job it is to limit injustices like that, the government, have no vested interest in hurting those companies and oftentimes have a reason to support them. It is clear that I will not be able to fight or change this dynamic, certainly not with an academic paper, so the real goal is knowledge. The American consumer base needs to understand that most corporations do not accurately represent themselves in advertisements and the media we are exposed to is developed specifically to sell to us. In this day and age, the consumers need to understand that they can be deceived by the companies they trust and it their responsibility to do real research on the products they wish to buy. Only by acting with this deliberation can the American consumers convince corporations that it is within their best interest to appeal to the customers and display their ideologies proudly.